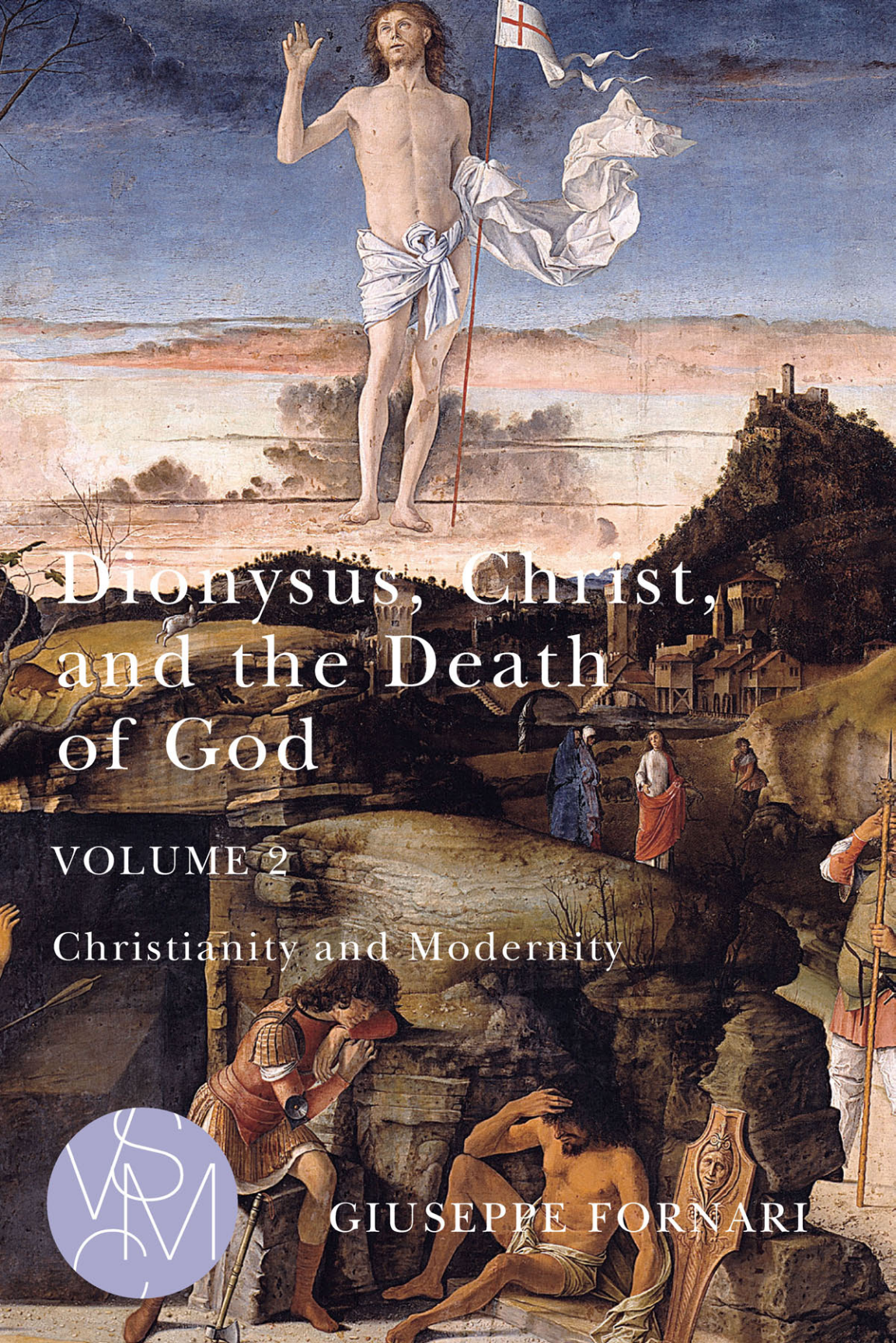

# Dionysus, Christ, and the Death of God

VOLUME 2

Christianity and Modernity

GIUSEPPE FORNARI

# Dionysus, Christ, and the Death of God

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# Dionysus, Christ, and the Death of God

VOLUME 2

## Christianity and Modernity

**Giuseppe Fornari**

Michigan State University Press · *East Lansing*

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# Preface to the Second Volume

A few words are needed to set the context of this second volume of my study: while it is intelligible on its own, it is of course more so if the reader has at least an idea of the overall contents of the first volume. But I would also say that a reader could equally profit from reading the first volume *after* reading this second one: in my case at least the order is not important since the philosophical and historical arguments I make are not linear but cyclical. Instead of endlessly repeating themselves in the manner of the hermeneutical circle, they spiral toward an ever-deepening awareness about ourselves, our own history, our own origin.

The overall purpose of the whole work is to draw a large comparison between antiquity and modernity through an examination of the main pillars of Western Civilization. Such an approach is not based on the fallacy of understanding one's own culture by unconsciously reasserting it: on the contrary I consciously adopt and assume my own cultural identity, but do so with the sole aim of understanding human culture in general. I offer a line of thought to readers of any culture.

This line of thought, however, further recommends itself because it is enhanced by two factors that are not parochial to my culture but function as givens in a phenomenological approach to history and the historical genesis

of the cultural phenomena themselves. Western Civilization was the first to exert a massive influence on the whole planet: whether it was for better or worse, it definitively altered the course of mankind's history. Yet it cannot take full credit for this, since it was also the first to not understand what it was doing, and the proof that this is so lies in the other factor that led me to devote a large study to such complex and controversial topics. Admirers and critics of Western Civilization alike pay insufficient heed to the fact that some of its philosophers, writers, and scientists have been able to delve into the question of the very origin of humanity—authors whose thought and work I review in the general introduction at the beginning of the first volume, starting from Nietzsche's discovery of the killing of God as the concealed birth of mankind and including Freud, Girard, Bataille. The fact that this work and thought is universally ignored shows that it has nothing to do with the usual denominational labels, but is a question of understanding what happened in Europe and became, willy-nilly, the common heritage of our era, the landscape in which all cultures equally reside, a question that must be creatively interpreted, whether by invention or by rediscovery.

The pivotal idea of my own interpretation is that human culture was born out of a particularly powerful collective experience that I call *mediation*, an ecstatic Event that in its very first occurrence bore a proto-symbolic meaning that detached the prehuman animals from their biological condition and brought them to experience or perceive an external *object* as something other than, and more than, the object of their animal instincts. For this reason I call this event ecstatic-objectual mediation, to be meant both as a supreme sacred mediation, which I call mediatory, and as the mediating or intermedial means necessary to reach it. An historical and philosophical reconstruction of how that might happen was offered, in part relying upon and in part correcting the work of the authors mentioned above. Though details escape us we are in a position to detect phenomenologically the generic features internal to repeated situations of crisis that lead as a creative result to a modified perception of certain crucial objects. At a certain point such a crisis was likely so intense and destructive that it compelled such animals to save themselves by a violent act directed toward a single individual or "culprit" in their midst, who was chosen out and thereby eliminated by the others. The consequences of such a shocking collective experience—literally "ecstatic" in the sense of the Greek *ek-stasis* meant as a forcible displacement

outside oneself—must have been incalculable since the pre- and now proto-human animals interacted with their previous repeated experiences of crisis and restoration of the instinctual objects. In this way they became capable of going beyond their biological setting and discovering an unprecedented horizon determined by something other than the sheer exigencies of their vital and adaptive needs. A stabilized, ecstatic perception of a non-biological "Object"—an "objectualizing" Event as I put it—imposed itself and directed these protohuman creatures toward other objects allowed or prohibited by such a source of superhuman power, the supreme source of Mediation of the entire group.

Such a mediatory Event, of which sacrifice became the cornerstone and pillar as the ritualized repetition of the first saving experience, was itself the first spark of what was to become religion, together with all the ritual, sacral, and magic means necessary to maintain its salvific potential. From now on ritual is the main performative and cognitive tool available to humanity; and its narrative and causal effect, through the development of articulated language, is myth aiming at explaining the sacrificial mediation from which it takes shape and symbolic strength. All human cognition was born out of the intermediation of ritual and myth directly stemming from the ecstatic mediation of a superhuman, divine power. The originary Event of mediation was the first example of a mediatory and intermediating process destined to be repeated infinite times throughout history, interacting with the context and problems of each human community. A "tradition," unrecognized but perfectly recognizable, and formulated by the authors dealt with in my introduction, helps us to partially understand this foundational process, though it is less helpful in making us understand its intimate nature and its real history. My own contribution to this "tradition" consists in emphasizing the crucial role played by the oscillation between the biological object and a nascently different kind of object, and by the central moment of mediation, the actual crystallization thanks to which the new universe of meaning takes shape so as then to reach systematic organization around a new and enlarged experience-of-object, of reality perceived as an object endowed with a meaning—an object that has indeed become an ecstatic source of meaning: what I call objectual reality, objectual world. Thanks to my mediatory approach we manage to understand human history as an unending fight for achieving and maintaining the human, humanized, and humanizing object by following

symbolic mediations able to make men live and collaborate together. In this unknown history the very crises that put the object in jeopardy can become the spring from which unforeseeable creative forces arise, conquering each time a new world from the ashes of the old one.

Modern thought was incapable of completely recognizing this decisive Event in its internal structure, even while it was developing the theoretical tools that could and would detect its outlines, and was even less capable to reconstruct the history that repeated and repeats more than ever today the same drama of loss and rediscovery of the object. For in fact, modernity was born from a doubt about and finally a denial of the existence of an objectual world bestowed upon man by the superior transcendent mediations of the tradition it had inherited, and made reachable through a series of sacred and cosmic intermediations—a *mundus imaginalis* but not imaginary—that began appearing as sheer magic and superstition. These mediations and intermediations became modernity's polemical target but at the same time remained its hidden inspiration, and it is to the study of these, with specific attention to Christianity, that this second volume is devoted.

A further proof that the more advanced European thinking was both insightful and blind about these topics comes from the underappreciated debate, begun in nineteenth century Germany but soon widespread in the main European countries, on the antagonism of *Kultur* and *Zivilisation*, of the culture of a given people centered on its own traditions and its unique identity, and civilization as a melting pot in which these peoples and their traditions are obliterated and merged by the freedom of trade and by indiscriminate claims of human rights—a confrontation Nietzsche summed up in his antagonistic comparison between Dionysus, the exalted Greek religious symbol of the bloodiest sacrificial rites, and Christ, the Crucified who does not want sacrifice any longer. Out of the debate, as is exemplified in the preface to my entire book about Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, it became clear that the traditions of each *Kultur* require a certain amount of controlled violence, deriving from sacrifice, which in itself implies inequality and discrimination among them, even up to the point of war; but also that *Zivilisation*, though in itself liberating and apparently peaceful, is a force that destroys each specific culture since it will not brook the truth of sacrifice, because of its blanket repudiation of all institutional and ritualized violence. The debate brought to the fore a real and insoluble dilemma, at work today

more than ever and in more tortuous and devious ways, in the unleashed process of our present chaotic globalization.

I hope to demonstrate that a solution does become possible if we are willing to become aware and cognizant of the real history that lies in our background, that begins with the very origin of mankind, and that finds a widespread and impressive witness in the ancient civilizations—particularly in the civilization so very influential to us, the Greek, which succeeded in transforming its own sacrificial history into an extraordinary inquiry on men and their violence within the frame of the *kosmos*. Ancient Greece presents us with three spectacular cultual and cultural movements that have much to teach us about our strange nature as human beings. The first is Orphism, the very religious cradle within which the subsequent forms of Greek thought were to be born, with its myth on the origin of humanity from the ashes of the Titans who killed and ate the baby Dionysus in the ritual act called *sparagmos* (tearing apart) culminating in the omophagy (eating a victim raw and still alive, *omos*). The second is Philosophy, which transformed by means of *logos* the Titanic dismemberment into the cognitive paradox of the One and the Many so as to reach a new explanation of the *kosmos* and of *physis*, until discovering with Socrates and above all Plato that humanity had in it something dangerously unique that allowed it to destroy or to save itself. The third is Tragedy, which transformed the Titanic origin of mankind into a representational equivalent to the paradox of the One and the Many by means of a system of characters ontologically linked to one another and doomed for this very reason to fight and destroy one another (this is what I call the principle of tragic impersonality), with the result of finally depicting human violence operating under the ambiguous oversight of the gods and the indifferent sky of the *kosmos*: an evolution reaching its sapiential peak in Euripides's *Bacchae* where the *sparagmos* of Pentheus becomes the final success and failure of the Dionysian cult and of Greek civilization itself. Not by chance the *Bacchae* is the inspirational text, through Nietzsche, for the culminating scene of *The Magic Mountain*, where the protagonist Hans Castorp sees in a dream two witches devouring a baby in an archaic Greek temple which encapsulates both the origin and the possible destiny of Western civilization and human civilization in general.

Greek culture, seen against the background of a prehistoric and Neolithic history of which it still shows traces and even a memory, in a powerful

dialectic between dismembering and remembering, is the perfect basis for understanding Judaism and Christianity, through the imperialistic influence of the Hellenistic age and the distinct contribution of Roman civilization, which imposed upon the ancient world a unity that proved to be fruitful. The Intermezzo with which the first volume concludes, so named for its intermediating function, attempted to set out this complex and multifaceted constellation of civilizations, which though viewed as separate from each other in fact influenced each other deeply. The very birth of monotheism, understood as a theological and highly abstract conception of a universal God, creator of heaven and earth, was fomented by the researches of the Greek philosophers who sought to unify the cosmic and the divine world through the tension between the divine One and the manifold entities of the Cosmos, beginning with the search for one *arche* in the pre-Socratics and culminating in the explicit idea in Plato and Aristotle of a rational *theologia* devoted to a spiritual and metaphysical God.

Jewish culture in its post-exilic and then Hellenistic period, increasingly sensitive to contemporaneous Greek thought, took on a more and more universalist tone in the cult and the conception of its national God, already spiritualized in the pre-exilic period and even more so during the exile by the prophetic movement, which used the very defeats of Israel as an argument to denounce the unfaithfulness of the ruling class and the inadequacy of the sacrificial cult of the archaic Yahweh, who was once a tribal god related to the underworld and accompanied by a goddess having to do with fertility rituals. Paradoxically, the religious and political campaign of the prophets finally detached the national God from the essential relationship with victory that typified the Covenant between the national God and the kingly representative of the people, a religious ideology prevalent throughout the ancient Near East. The repeated historical experience of disaster itself became the sign of Yahweh's omnipotence, since it was He that brought it on as a punishment for His unfaithful people. And yet I hold that another more influential, though concealed, event played an essential role in renewing the "theology of disaster" conceived by the prophetic tradition: according to Giovanni Garbini, this event, inaugurating the post-exilic era under Persian domination, was the assassination of the Davidic heir, Zerubbabel, murdered in the Temple of Jerusalem along with his prophet and high priest, Zechariah, at the hands of the priest Joshua, probably during the ceremony that

was meant to install this Davidic descendant as king and satrap to the Persian king. This shocking act provoked a schism and a heated debate within the priestly caste in Jerusalem, a confrontation that was the inspiration of several important biblical texts, above all the dramatic and fragmentary account in the book of Zechariah, and the Songs of the Suffering Servant attributed to Deutero-Isaiah, of which both texts left profound traces that endure in the Christian scriptures such as in the Gospels and the Epistle to the Hebrews. This debate and controversy would have stimulated an interest in Greek philosophy among the more advanced priestly intellectuals of Israel, though this circumstance was later obscured for denominational reasons necessary to give shape and definition to the Jewish identity.

Middle Judaism, the Judaic period between the Hellenistic dominion and the Jewish wars, was heir to this harsh debate and tried in several discrepant ways to resolve the paradox of a God who was to be all-powerful and universal and at the same time a national God. How was the supreme mediation of this remote and mysterious divinity to be conceived, and with what intermediating figures and objectual results? The solution lay in finding a way to identify a suitable mediator of the supreme, divine Mediator, an anointed one like Zerubbabel, a Davidic Messiah, or a High Priest, a double messiahship that would provide a berth for a wide variety of possible solutions and deep divisions among opposing religious and political parties. In the discussion of this problem, which dealt with the thorny problem of better defining the monotheistic God and his relation with humanity (a new theological version of the paradox of the One and the Many), the figure of Jesus of Nazareth, so influential in the future self-interpretation of the Western world through the ecumene established and dominated by Rome, found his mission and his destiny. The way was paved for discovering a surprising ecstatic-objectual meaning both of divinity *and* humanity, an original synthesis of the enigma of the One and the Many later expressed by the Christian dogma of Trinity.

In order to study Jesus as an historical character and complete the comparative picture drawn in the first volume, that concluded with the "comparatist" confrontation between Christianity and paganism in the first centuries of our era, we must start with an attempt to recover the characteristics of the religion that was to be born from him by sifting through the sources and the controversies that surround them, and reconstruct thereby

modern Europe's rediscovery of the historical Jesus, one of the more important and less studied chapters of Europe's cultural history.

Such then is the context in which you meet the present volume. Its lengthy analyses are comprehensible in themselves but in the end must be connected to their wider historical frame, and in the end of this volume, I offer a comparatist conclusion of all my research that will do just this. An increased awareness about who we are, as both heirs of the Western world and inhabitants of a Westernized planet, is the desired destination of this very long journey—an increased awareness in the form of a new historiography and a new philosophy able both to reconstruct their own genesis as cultural endeavors and to give us interpretative tools adequate for imagining a globalized world that is yet mindful of its real historical identity, manifold but at the same time unitary, proud in a heritage that is shared by all human beings.

VOLUME II

# Christianity and Modernity

This is the second volume of a two-volume work. The first volume is titled *Dionysus, Christ, and the Death of God: The Great Mediations of the Classical World*.

# The Christian Mediation

I have still many things to say to you but you cannot bear them now. However, when the Spirit of truth comes to you, he will guide you to the whole truth; because he will not speak for himself, but tell you what he has heard and announce things to come.

—John 16:12–13

Transhumanized [*trasumanar*]: to express this *per verba* would be impossible, so let the example suffice for those called to the experience by Grace.

—Dante, *Paradiso,* I, 70–72

1.

# The Problem of the Sources

## 1. Identifying the Type of Text

We have seen the eventful history leading up to Judaism and so-called monotheism—a much less monolithic phenomenon than is generally thought—creating favorable conditions in Middle Judaism for the rise of a dissident sect inspired by the teaching and witness of Jesus of Nazareth. The relationship to Hellenism was an integral, repressed part of Judaism's confusing, tortuous course, while later, when Roman domination had achieved Hellenistic universalism in an original form, the relationship of Judaism and of its Christian offshoot to Rome appears disorientingly twofold, both antagonistic and indirectly influential. We must now complete the picture and give an answer to the historical and cultural problems considered in the preface in relation to Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* and to the conflict between *Kultur* and *Zivilisation,* amounting fundamentally to a question of identity that pervaded European civilization during the crisis at the turn of the twentieth century, a question still unanswered today. It remains, then, to deal with the part concerning Christianity; this is closer to us and more controversial since the modern Western world was formed by criticizing and rejecting the authority, *auctoritas,* of medieval Christianity, after having

been nurtured by it. We are far from understanding the real meaning of this upheaval, though it is essential for us to do so as long as something of the European tradition remains alive, as a sign of European self-awareness and vitality or as a legacy to other cultures, increasingly merged and conflicting with the global transformations in which we are immersed.

Our reconnaissance of early Christian apologetics in the Intermezzo has already provided significant information about the obstacles facing Christianity *in statu nascendi* in its dialogue with pagan culture, summed up by the chief among these, the comparatist stumbling block: Christianity could only establish itself by demonstrating convincingly that it was different and superior to all the other cults flourishing in the mediatory hodgepodge of the Roman Empire. The objective now is twofold: first to ascertain if the founding texts of Christian mediation contain any indications about the relationship with paganism that are not generic and merely opposed to it and also about the relationship with Judaism from which the followers of Jesus of Nazareth were seeking to differentiate themselves; and secondly, to determine especially if these texts can take us to the fundamental motivation, the innermost detail, of the new covenant between God and mankind that they set out. My earlier comments about the Eucharist and the explorative look at the Epistle to the Hebrews make it clear that the answer, at least in part, must be affirmative. And it appears from our inquiry so far that the conflict with Judaism necessarily implied eventual conflict with paganism, though this remained latent as long as the religious movement inspired by Jesus developed within the confines of Middle Judaism, emerging gradually as Christ's message spread among the Gentiles and taking the struggle within Judaism to its breaking point, exactly as documented in the Epistle to the Hebrews. That in turn brought about identity conflicts with the pagan world, and the crucifixion of Christ, urged by the Jewish authorities but ordered and carried out by the Romans, appears ex post to be a prophetic foretaste of this dramatic evolution.

We began with certain comparative themes in order to reconstruct the development of Western civilization through its twofold, indeed fourfold, components, Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian, and almost spontaneously those themes have passed over into thinking about the origin of the cultural mediations involved that turned out to be comparatist and composite in their very origin and nature, thus finding further thresholds of crisis

and objectual creation in combining and recombining with other cultures. This is no less true for Christianity, whose salient features and organic unity in conception await our examination: classified in that way, the intercultural and intercultual difficulties that marked the formation of Christianity can provide privileged access to its constitutive processes, its most deeply hidden identity.

The complex and controversial nature of all this material, however, calls for some illustration beforehand of the method and approach to sources followed here, and of the large debate on these subjects in modern times. Approaching Christian texts, and Judaic texts, too, is even more perilous than approaching Greco-Roman classical texts or those of other ancient civilizations in general. With Greek and Roman texts, so influential for our way of thinking and our ideas, the cultural difference is such that once we are aware of the different context as compared to our own, there is no great difficulty in fitting each piece into the right place in the interpretive mosaic, leaving blanks for missing pieces and reconstructing where reasonable, and finally building up a recognizable overall picture. Judaic and Christian texts, however, elicit another kind of response since they touch on moral and existential aspects and conduct a personal dialogue to which the reader's response may be favorable or hostile but is rarely indifferent. Once we start comparing them, we shall soon discover the reasons for this difference in impact.

The ancient Greek texts most closely resembling the texts of the Bible are the tragedies, historical works, and Plato's dialogues, and there is a very good reason for this similarity: they influenced and actually shaped many aspects of the biblical world. And yet the works of Thucydides or Plato, and even of the more exciting Euripides, aim to engage our intellectual faculties primarily, with the emotional and moral faculties remaining subordinate to them, not because they are valued less than cool reason but because they arrive at their truth only through connecting to the impersonal or rather prepersonal laws of *kosmos* and Being or, as in the mature Athenian tragedy and skeptical philosophies, to the unknowability of those laws which is, in any case, registered or demonstrated through *nous,* intellectual perception. If we fail to meet this implicit requirement of Greek texts, we overlook an essential factor in them and miss the best the Hellenic world has to offer. We cannot appreciate the full artistic and cognitive potential of the *Bacchae* if, like most commentators in the last century, we just fall back on the modern

conditioned reflex of taking sides for or against; we lose sight of what I call the principle of tragic impersonality,[1] the rotating system of the characters and their dependence on divine laws that are now incomprehensible.

On the contrary, in the prophetic books of the Bible and in Psalms, Job, and Ecclesiastes, the personal and emotional side is everything, not because it excludes the intellectual side but simply because it is all one with it. The reasons of the heart are inseparable from those of the intellect, and that is because the communicative intent of those texts has its origin in the personal dialogue with the God of Israel and always returns to it as to its supernatural center of gravity. In contrast to the composed analytical attitude of the Greeks in their quest to comprehend and balance, and to the Roman aptitude for organizing, determined to make the rational nature of the world visible in the unification and control of its dominions, the Judaic and Christian world saw total human involvement, a questioning and seeking after the objectual significance of human life. At its best, it successfully acquires the intellectual clear-sightedness that originated in Greece but makes it serve the ends of compassion and shared feelings. The results are overwhelming or repugnant, according to how we respond, and for this very reason they have a distorting effect, either because they move what differentiates the biblical world from our own outside our field of vision or, vice versa, turn it into a pretext for shaking off a direct solicitation that we find annoying and harassing.

These distinctive features of Christianity are intensified and heightened because the Bible message is concentrated and incarnated in a specific individual, in one human and divine mediator who becomes the signifier of everything, of every person. Everything begins in him and ends in him; the Christian texts are nothing but a continual variation on this single theme, and the result is to increase the possible double effect produced by these biblical writings, either to be absorbed or be rejected. But this is only the start of an ascending course that at times becomes practically vertical. If, in this continual variation around their Christological center of gravity, the Christian texts do in fact display a certain unity that has dominated the scene over countless centuries, in modern times and in the West awareness has grown that their unity is more varied and multifaceted than was thought. It embraces views and theologies differing widely one from another, not to speak of conflicting interpretations, blurred and obscured by the canonization of the principal

Christian writings, while what did not chime with that harmonization was rejected as noncanonical and heretical. And proof that the efforts at orthodox normalization were inadequate to eliminate the problems and tensions comes from Christian history, rife with theological battles leading to divisions of all kinds and conflicting positions far indeed from finding any solution. Certainly, it is appropriate to distinguish between the clashes that occurred in late antiquity and medieval times, when the Christian mediation enjoyed great vitality, always managing to overcome crises and conquer new frontiers of development and progress, and the post-Reformation conflict that, as time passed, saw an overall weakening of the Christian mediation, alongside a great outpouring of creative energy in both Protestant and Catholic camps, and finally gave rise to the antitheological revolt of the Enlightenment that sought to free European societies from the nightmare of a religious disputation that had deteriorated into ideological wrangling.

For the birth of the modern world, the consequences of this gradual transition of Western Christianity from early growing pains to growing crises were not negligible; in the space of a few centuries, doubt came to be cast on the magical-intermedial paradigms inherited from antiquity that already, in medieval times and in the Renaissance, had been subjected to ecclesiastical and intellectual criteria so as to be verified and checked, with the unintended effect that these paradigms were transformed from within until they finally collapsed and transmogrified into the new oppositional form of modern science. Without the idea of checking the historical authenticity of the Christian scriptures, the Reformation could never have happened; the idea itself was humanistic in origin but sprang from still earlier conciliar and ecclesiastical roots. For its part, the Catholic Church responded with a commitment to confirm the historical and documentary validity of its traditions, a work of validation to which European Jewry, forced for centuries to confront a predominantly Christian environment, made a valuable contribution. This activity laid the foundations of modern biblical scholarship, which nevertheless developed just like the modern world itself, that is to say, disregarding the mediations that had created it and their original meaning; such a hiatus is typical of every historical alternation but, in the modern age, becomes a refusal of all traditions. In the eighteenth century the rationalists of the Enlightenment used Bible criticism as a tool to break free from subjection to Christianity; this had

the obvious advantages of an independent critical approach but the less obvious disadvantage of restricting their scope to the facial expression of the text, ignoring and thereby obliterating the real tenor of the ancient religious mediations from which these very texts emerged. The work of anatomizing the biblical corpus began and led to a considerable increase in knowledge, even if it ignored the life-giving spirit within it, forgetting the difference between a dead or inanimate body and a vital, self-moving one. The historical-critical method is a major achievement of modern consciousness, the fruit of the distinctive mentality of Western Christianity, and in particular of the inquiring spirit born from Reformation, but it needs to be supplemented and improved on by awareness of the historical and cognitive limits that shaped it, by retroacting self-reflection to compensate for what was initially obliterated.

Modern biblical studies have produced two major acquisitions regarding Christianity that closely overlap. The first relates to the number and diversity of Christian sources, each to be studied according to its provenance and particular characteristics. The second was the discovery that the image of Christ as the preexistent Son of God, such an extremely dominant image, resulted from a process of interpretation superimposed on the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth. Awareness of this stimulated research into what has been called the historical Jesus, itself inseparable from the study of sources but with the specific characteristic of being the point where historical-critical comparison with Christian scriptures is at its most concentrated. In the rest of this chapter we shall look at these connected but distinct aspects in summary fashion, without attempting to describe their history or map out every line taken. I intend to report the most important results of these studies, while at the same time overcoming their limitations by using a historical and hermeneutic approach that is more comprehensive, in both senses of the word, comprehending and including all the various elements in a more holistic and contextual view.

I shall begin with what a present-day reader approaching the Bible texts, both Judaic and Christian, might regard as their most striking feature: their pseudepigraphy, that is, the attribution of a text to a certain sacred author revealed by modern research to be false. If this circumstance is not adequately understood, it immediately misleads and casts a suspicion of spuriousness over the works before they are studied.

## 2. Judaic and Christian Pseudepigraphy

At the beginning of modern age, under the influence of the method of the new natural science, the most daring intellectuals began doubting of the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, as much as of Solomon's authorship of the sapiential books and David's of the Psalms.[2] Baruch Spinoza, in his *Tractatus theologico-politicus,* outstanding among the earliest works of modern biblical criticism, found new arguments for this skeptical view rejecting the traditional paternity of the books of the Hebrew Bible; he openly denied that Moses wrote the Pentateuch and recognized, in the first five books of the Bible and in the following historical books, the hand of a single author writing centuries later; and he also questioned the authorship of the remaining scriptures, dating the collected Old Testament to the second century BC.

This attitude was new neither in its single statements nor even in the refusal of traditional faith, but in the way it placed the biblical texts and their subjects on a par with any other text or subject. It is not by some prejudice symmetrical and contrary to a fideistic bias that Spinoza is moved, but by the assumption that a supernatural revelation, if real, will be and must be logically consistent with any conclusion reached by a rational examination based on the first principles that emerge from the "things themselves," as Husserl says.[3] To criticize his attitude as no less prejudicial than the one it attacks, as Leo Strauss does in his sharp analysis of Spinoza's critique of revealed religions,[4] is not sufficient. Had it not been the church that introduced a method of rational examination of facts believed to be supernatural according to the principle *constat de supernaturalitate?* A far-reaching historical reconstruction shows the religious roots of a rational and ascertaining mentality that will become more and more secular with Enlightenment, then become positivism, and finally, in a more complex and less ideological way, phenomenology. It is not a question of establishing the intentions of one thinker, though important, but of grasping the overall meaning of his statements, and the meaning in this case, going beyond Spinoza's convictions, consists in highlighting the historicity of biblical texts and the revelation they deal with, which have to be rigorously studied as *facta* without any exception, because they do require this, given their absolute claims, or more specifically their claim that the absolute manifests and realizes itself in history. This is the real rising of modern biblical sciences, prepared but not yet fully developed by

Thomas Hobbes's brilliant biblical analyses in the *Leviathan,* as their aim is to demonstrate the real nature and purpose of political power,[5] while Spinoza wants to face the problem of Judaic and Christian revelation in history with the aim of testing it rationally. Spinoza's proposal to emend this revelation (in the sense of his *De intellectus emendatione*), so as to explain what could be true in it thanks to his own *philosophia perennis* (i.e., beyond history), became a means to reach a historical awareness made possible by a radically rational *methodus.*

Spinoza's admirable conclusions on the real dating of the Bible and the authorship of its first books, whose value has still to be understood by several biblical scholars today, spread more widely when, at the end of the eighteenth century and especially in the nineteenth, the last barriers to systematical historical study of biblical texts collapsed, and the methods of philologists and historians, and so-called source criticism, began to be applied to Christian texts. It was as if a buried and forgotten city came to light, analogous to the discovery of Pompeii in the age of Enlightenment. Unknown archaeological strata became visible, giving precise hints about the gradual, variegated, and multifarious formation of Christian tradition; and unavoidably, as already Spinoza had done, the traditional authorship of the biblical books was questioned and systematically scrutinized and in many cases rejected.

The first thing established by this approach was the essential difference between the three synoptic Gospels, so called on account of their close textual correspondences enabling them to be read in parallel alongside one another—in the traditional order of Matthew, Mark, and Luke—and the fourth Gospel attributed to the apostle John, to be considered as more recent because of its strongly theological focus. This resulted in a more or less relative and much extended time-scale, and also to challenging the traditional attribution of the Gospels to the apostles, such as Matthew and John, or to their close followers, such as Mark, who was thought to have recorded Peter's testimony, and Luke, similarly, to have closely followed the teachings of Paul. In this way almost all the books of the Bible were discovered to be wrongly attributed to prestigious authors (pseudepigraphy) or dubiously ascribed to leading figures in certain communities (and here we might speak of parapigraphy), a discovery that sparked off endless controversy between antireligious iconoclasts and dogged zealots out to defend the defensible and the indefensible alike. Since modern skepticism has particularly focused on such

problems, I shall concentrate on pseudepigraphy in general, leaving aside the more complex cases of authors such as Mark and Luke, deemed in early accounts to be followers of apostolic figures, but there is no reason to doubt that these are the authors' real names, even though little or nothing certain is known about them.[6] We will see that recovery of the mediatory meaning of these traditional attributions is possible only by thoroughly developing the historical method that Spinoza was the first to apply on a large scale.

Pseudepigraphy was indeed a normal phenomenon in antiquity. The Greco-Roman world abounds in writings falsely ascribed to famous authors with the aim of gaining a place in some sacral, social, or political tradition, and among the other motives we cannot exclude the idea of favoring the public success of the work. Governing all these various motives there is a very different idea of authorship from our own, as is evident from the existence of mythical and legendary authors (Orpheus or Homer, for example). In antiquity the author was not an individual creating a unique work through personal capacities, but someone who received and expressed a message coming from a superior, cosmic, and/or divine reality, to such a point that authorship could be happily ignored if the work's objective aspects were thought to predominate. This was normally the case with works of art, subject to the natural limits imposed by the material and the human effort involved,[7] and destined for a religious and public use that constituted the work's objectual status. Works of literature and philosophy had the prestige of written communications, were often intended for an elite, and enjoyed a privileged status; they were reputed worthy of a free man without, however, losing the public and objectively conditioned character through which the author took his place in a larger chain of inheritance whose source lay in ontological-cosmic reality, with public recognition as its logical consequence; and if general recognition, or political propaganda as well, attributed a written work to a fictitious author, this neither altered nor invalidated the scheme's functioning.

Judaism shows the same tendencies here as other ancient societies by attributing the Pentateuch to Moses, the Psalms to David, and the books of wisdom to Solomon, while the prophetic books, over the centuries, have proved to be a kind of catch-all for writings more or less loosely related to the given prophet. The difference in the Judaic context is that the pseudepigraphy refers systematically to the supreme authorial source: the mediation of

a personal God. In Israel, besides a certain casualness or actual indifference about authorship, an attitude just as likely to be found in Greek and Roman culture, a decisive nuance was added by God's fathering creation, knowing man and his heart for his eventual salvation or perdition, and becoming his author for all intents and purposes, in a sense that at a certain point also he becomes the moving hand that writes. Indeed, the idea of God's authorship of creation translates into the idea of a divine script fixing every individual destiny forever: in Judaic apocalyptics of a deterministic stamp the afterlife destiny of every human being is said to be written on tablets filed away in the courts of heaven. In this perspective, the one thing that matters is to attain full divine objectuality; writing is the means and symbol for this,[8] and valid to the extent that God is its author. The distinctive tone of writers in this world is therefore a secondary matter, not because it has no value but because in the final analysis it is known only to God and derives its value from him alone. It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that a Bible writer practically guarantees his work by leaving it unsigned, ensuring that it functions as intermediary for the divine mediation. Pseudepigraphy is, in any case, an unspoken form of humility and faith in God, referring only to leading figures recognized and authorized by the tradition and appealing to the one true author who is God. To the secret name of God there corresponds the secret name of those faithful to him, whom he alone knows.

Christian writers as well often place themselves under the aegis of an illustrious religious writer, and thus under the aegis of the divine Author who is their inspiration, but in their case the divine authorship passes by way of Jesus Christ, is in Jesus Christ, and always goes back to his mediation (the Gospel is *according to* Matthew, not *of* Matthew).[9] The first and supreme objectual *auctor* (and therefore the supreme *auctoritas*) is God and the Son of God through whom all things have been done, and so the *Logos* made flesh has no need to write anything as he is the Word and the source of all words. If the quest for the propitiatory, soul-saving anonymity recognizable in Judaism can be extended to Christian writers as well, we should note that Christianity introduces a clear tension toward what is visibly and notably human, given that it is the Son of God who presents his Word and makes possible the words to transmit it to us, which sets off a circularity of expression that becomes identifying and ontological. This saving circularity is epitomized in the mediatory motif of the name: anyone that calls on the

name of Christ is given the opportunity to receive a new name of truth and salvation. Several interconnected themes dominate the book of Revelation, namely the revelatory book (βίβλιον, understood as a scroll), writing (both books and letters), and personal names, written on various media, saintly or blasphemous according to whether they originate in the name of Christ or in satanic forces; in the latter case, however, it is tantamount to wiping out the name, to the anonymity of evil. The divine authorial tone appeared to absorb personal identity, but instead it reveals an opposite potential, since it depends on the individual, on his free choice, whether or not he secures an eschatological name and acquires definitive objectual recognition, which becomes personal and authorial as well.

The book of Revelation takes up the Judaic theme of divine written lists of the saved and the damned but modifies its determinism, speaking of those who shall be saved because their names are written "in the book of life of the Lamb" (13:8) and have not been previously blotted out (3:5), implying that all names were written there originally and that the one true name is the name of Christ's salvation. A potential transitivity is at work making the visions scattered throughout the book appear, at one and the same time, like scenes of the last judgment and of the real created, human world restored to an earthly dimension, redeemed and at peace, led back to the word and name of Christ. All this is presented as a revelation in several stages, telling the seer and the whole of creation about the book of salvation, the "book of life": the initial command to write the book of Revelation; the opening of the seven seals of the divine book; the booklet that the seer must devour to become the living receptacle for the figural visions set out in the remainder of the book; and its final completion when, at the end of the visions, it is consigned to the follower-reader for him to fulfill it in himself and preserve his name in the book of Christ's salvation. And in line with this intention, at the beginning and end of the text, two first-person declarations tell us the *nomen auctoris* ("I, John . . ." 1:9 and 22:8), the same as the fourth evangelist whereas it is two altogether different authors,[10] a sign that, excluding improbable homonymies,[11] the John of Revelation is referring to a shared tradition going back to the Johannine community. It would make no sense here to try to ascertain the identity and number of all these Johns: what matters is the creation of a kind of collective identity that includes and fulfills the individual identity of the author. This is part of a wider process involving salvation for the whole

of mankind. The book follows a clear-cut course in which the person both individual and collective to whom the divine work is addressed becomes its coauthor and embodies its message.

More than a thousand years later, in Dante's *Divine Comedy,* "the sacred poem [*poema sacro*] / to which both Heaven and Earth set their hands,"[12] this figural and existential circularity is fully displayed. Beatrice calls Dante (another *figura* individual as character and collective as a symbol of mankind) by name at the poem's emotional core (*Purgatorio,* XXX, 55) to signal that redemption is approaching. And finally, at the very end, he comes to contemplate God and God's entire plan of creation in the form of a book, symbolizing universal salvation and an infinite complexity brought back to unity thanks to a supreme objectual mediation, a supreme loving atonement:

> Deep within its depths I saw,
> bound by love in one volume,
> the scattered pages of the universe [*ciò che per l'universo si squaderna*].[13]

Dante's sublime poetry should not induce us to idealize the written production of the Jewish and Christian world. Like written works produced in every age or culture, the Judaic and Christian texts have been manipulated to suit certain interests or for propaganda purposes, but that does not alter the fact that creatural recognition is the basic motive and purpose of the sacred books of the two religions and that our idea of authorship is its distant, fragile descendent. Following the great literary and philosophical achievements of the Middle Ages, permeated by the religious mediations from which they derived, the Italian Renaissance formulated the notion of *genio,* that is, of the great man or artist who bears the miraculous imprint of his Creator within him. And it is no accident that prestige of the sort attached especially to the major figurative artists—to Leonardo, Raphael, and Michelangelo—endowed with the faculty of making divine beauty creaturally visible. The act of seeing is the consequence of a mediation admirably become true, the visible sign of an accomplished circularity between Creator and creature. Dante's *terzina* on the "one volume" of creation follows a *verbum videndi* that transforms the poet's sight into the faithful and loving reflection of the divine sight, even though this sight both human and divine, once split up from its absolute mediatory source, would have given place to the less and

less controllable scattering of what the human mind is capable of producing. Later, the modern idea of authorship became codified with the Romantic view of genius, understood as a personality able to express the boundless and inscrutable forces of nature, an idea expressly advanced in Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. But this subjective interpretation of the figure of the author gradually deprived it of objective motivation and objectual substance until it finally became inflated and void.[14]

As a result, our media-dominated age is in no condition to understand that some of the greatest thinkers of all time remain nameless, presumably by choice, such as the author, or rather editor-in-chief, of the Pentateuch and 1–2 Kings, and the authors of Job, Ecclesiastes, the Gospel of John, and the Epistle to the Hebrews. This cultural remoteness prevents many people from understanding Bible pseudepigraphy and blinds them to the evident success of a very different and far more insidious pseudepigraphy in our own society of images and appearances, where the sense of the objective provenance and objectual meaning of a work has been lost, so that, as a rule, media (or academic) inflation of socially recognized works results in their loss of value. Having clarified these points, we will now look at the more notable findings coming from modern studies of Christian sources.

## 3. A Multifaceted Approach to the Sources

Returning now to the summary reconstruction of the history of the historical-critical approach to Christian sources, two principle corollaries followed from the diversity of the gospel texts: the first, that Mark is the earliest Gospel on account of its brevity and conciseness, is shared almost unanimously by scholars today; the second, that the fourth Gospel has no historical content, has been refuted by research over recent decades. These ideas led to complicated reconstructions of the relationships between gospel and other New Testament sources, which were also subjected to other types of approaches in the twentieth century. The main approaches to be mentioned for my purposes are these: history of the tradition, attempting to reconstruct the manner in which the surviving texts were produced and transmitted by the church communities; redaction criticism, concerned with the editing history leading up to the final text; and form criticism, investigating the various

literary genres employed (gospel, epistle, apocalypse, etc.) or the subgenres present in a text (in a gospel there are sermons, parables, maxims, apocalyptic sayings, etc.). These methods are no alternative to source criticism, but they add detail and complete it, and delineate the historical-critical method as a whole, even if the accent will remain on source study since that identifies the basic data bank to draw information from, and without excluding methods that have not been introduced yet, to the extent that their results can be integrated into the kind of nonreductive, contextual, and phenomenological vision I intend to utilize.

The chronological and historical distinction between the four Gospels certainly induced nineteenth-century scholars to concentrate their attention on the three synoptic Gospels and led to the so-called hypothesis of the two sources. The acknowledged precedence of Mark made it possible to determine its use in both Matthew and Luke, quite independently of each other in the opinion of most scholars. However, the presence of further convergences between Matthew and Luke led to the hypothesis that they were able, still independently, to draw on a collection of sayings (λόγια) attributed to Jesus, called Q from the German *Quelle* meaning source. Thus we should have two main sources for the synoptic Gospels, Mark and Q. The majority of commentators still accept the source Q hypothesis, though it has been criticized and disputed on several grounds, starting from the total lack of independent textual evidence.[15] Even so, the conjectural reconstruction of the various gospel sources is even more intricate.

In addition to Mark and the hypothetical Q, Matthew and Luke made use of their own sources, called M and L respectively.[16] For John, instead, a further tradition has been postulated, independent of the synoptic traditions and belonging to the Johannine school. The independence of John from the synoptics has again become a matter of controversy in recent years, on two counts: the presence of certain not negligible parallels and a further conjecture that the evangelist deliberately sought to differentiate himself from the others,[17] but all this seems an academic squabble rather than a serious attempt at making some progress in our historical knowledge.[18] The substantial independence of the Johannine tradition remains a consensus in the present state of research, and the parallels with the synoptics are easily explainable with ancient layers of shared tradition. Certainly, unless there are some sensational textual discoveries, like those in the Judaic sphere at Qumran and at

Nag-Hammadi in the sphere of Gnosticism, these and other problems are bound to maintain a margin of doubt or even remain largely unresolved, which is, besides, the bugbear and delight of all studies of antiquity. However, we must not overlook the fact that the Christian writings enjoy a relatively privileged position in regard to the variety of sources and the not-so-great distance in time from the events they describe. And though this advantage would seem to be invalidated by the greater rate of devout and legendary transformation, even devotional language has its criteria and codes that can transmit information. The general observation we need to bear in mind is that the Gospels as we know them are the result of at least three phases: (1) Jesus's preaching; (2) the apostles' preaching; (3) the editing of the final texts. The situation is made much more confusing by the fact that phase (2) percolated through several channels in the earliest Christian communities with their separate traditions and was transmitted orally before being written down. Phase (3) in its turn may have had different subphases, that is to say, it was variously edited at different times, not to mention the glosses and interpolations in textual transmission that present a frequent snag in studying the writings of antiquity.

The Christian sources are, however, more numerous, as for example, the Acts of the Apostles, a remarkable double of the Gospel of Luke and ascribed by most scholars to the author of the third Gospel for textual reasons and for its style and theology, and an invaluable font of evidence, albeit tendentious and partial, for the church at the very dawn of its history. Moreover, outside the Gospels, the epistolary corpus attributed to Paul constitutes a core of notable texts, fraught with doctrinal consequences, that has constantly exercised the critical skills of commentators. As a result of their labors, the Epistle to the Hebrews, a dubious attribution even in antiquity, has been definitively expunged from his writings, seven letters have been identified as authentic (1 Thessalonians, Galatians, Philippians, Philemon, 1–2 Corinthians, and Romans), and the others have been classified for the most part as deutero-Pauline or indeed trito-Pauline, i.e., attributed to second- and third-generation followers of Paul. Pseudepigraphy completely dominates the field in regard to the other epistles accepted into the Christian canon, which are to be traced to other Christian communities. Without entering on the further problems connected with New Testament writings, I would just point out the existence of a large number of apocryphal gospels, so called because they

are not ratified by the canonical tradition: some of these apocrypha have been lost, such as the Aramaic *Matthew* mentioned by Papias (not to be confused with the homonymous Gospel), and the possible identity of the phantom source Q according to Garbini,[19] or the *Gospel of Peter* to be connected to the Aramaic *Matthew,* while others survive and indeed have long been a supplementary source for the life of Jesus, since they fill gaps in the information to be found in the canonical Gospels. The Coptic *Gospel of Thomas* stands on its own. It was discovered among the scrolls of Nag-Hammadi (written in the fourth century AD) and is Gnostic in character but goes back to a Greek prototype usually dated to 200 AD,[20] having evident textual similarities with the synoptic Gospels that can be easily explained as derived from them.[21] Nevertheless, it is not to be ruled out, even if it remains improbable, that *Thomas* could transmit some earlier versions of the synoptic traditions; part of the fascination exerted by this text is due to its subdivision into *logia,* showing us what the alleged source Q might have looked like (though it has no direct relationship).[22] Added to these sources, we have the testimony provided by writings of the apostolic era, in particular the so-called *agrapha,* the *logia* of Jesus coming from the apocrypha or not included in any works specifically designed to preserve and comment on them in which we might still hear a distant echo of the original oral transmission.[23]

In short, there exists a whole galaxy of Christian sources, and it is no easy matter to find a way through the countless controversies arising simply from their number, let alone from their paternity and nature. In any case, a scientific approach to biblical writings cannot do without a historical-critical study of the texts, integrated with the other methods I have mentioned. In recent decades, to these approaches others have been added, often in opposition. One approach gives precedence to oral transmission, which, if taken with a grain of salt, is not in contradiction with other approaches provided the oral, mnemonic mode is not conceived as a kind of essence in contrast to writing, as Eric Alfred Havelock made it in regard to ancient Greece, with misleading results. Other approaches to interpretation are literary or narratological, bracketed together here for the sake of convenience since they share certain essential assumptions. In recent times these have gained a large consensus, so it is only fair to devote some space to them; on the other hand a further approach can only be dealt with later, after we have treated the problem of the historical Jesus.

After a long period of textual anatomizing that completely ignores the real context of the works being analyzed, and of insoluble diatribes over conjectures about textual stratification and attribution, the literary-narrative approach to interpretation now takes as its basic assumption that texts—and also hypertexts, including various hypotexts[24]—are to be studied synchronically for what they are in their present state, seeing that the diachronic approach of the historical-critical method remains highly controversial and conjectural and, moreover, pushes into the background, or actually obliterates, the communicative aims of the works and the messages they want to transmit. The result of this is a more holistic approach, with texts considered in their final shape and overall aim, within a network of texts among which they were intended to fit creatively and faithfully. New and serious difficulties, in turn, are lurking in this approach.

This reaction, literary and narratological in origin, has undoubtedly been healthy, giving a new stimulus to Bible studies that enables the religious aims of the texts to be integrated without the constant curb of doubt. I shall try to draw on these studies to reconstruct the referential network of some gospel passages but in spite of their merits they suffer from the limitations of following an extremely partial and anachronistic concept, that is, the modern concept of literature, even worse if understood in terms of structuralism or semiotics. Nor can one see why a holistic approach to texts has to leave out of consideration not only the philological and historical questions related to the creation and stratification of the texts but still more the reconstruction of a religious and theological context that is certainly not literary in the modern meaning of the word. The idea of the hypertext, for example, allows us to take a fresh look at the text-editing processes in a more versatile way and in any case does not excludes historical studies, which are necessarily diachronic. The scholars involved in these changes of direction and watchwords appear to forget that even materially the texts on which they must base themselves are already the result of hundreds of years of philological study and still far from being concluded. Worth quoting, for its eminent common sense, is the following comment by Edmondo Lupieri, talking about the Nestle-Aland edition of the New Testament, the best text available today:

> It is a theoretical text, a text that never actually existed in antiquity, but that corresponds to what, on the basis of the manuscripts that have survived to

> our day, we think the author might have written. That we have the texts we do rather than others is mere accident, the result of external circumstances such as the fact that they escaped destruction by fire, or that they survived in a dry location.[25]

This last remark needs to be qualified since the loss of all or part of a text could be due to deliberate destruction, either directly, through some ecclesiastical or legal provision, or indirectly by discouraging its circulation or reproduction in manuscript. Still, the fact remains that on countless occasions manuscripts were indeed preserved through accidental factors inherent in the material transmission of culture and that philological restoration is approximate and, moreover, limited by the circumstance that every tradition, age, or community tended to fashion its texts in a certain way. In short, a firm anchorage of absolute textuality is nonexistent: in this connection Origen, developing an idea of which we have found the creationistic version in Dante, made a distinction between the Gospels that have come down to us in all their diversity, and the "eternal Gospel" (*euangelion aionion*) of Revelation 14:6, which will be accessible at the end of time,[26] but this will be as the outcome of history and eschatology fulfilling the multiplicity and unity of all the scriptures,[27] not as a premise already given formalistically. To be consistent, the literary approach would have to study a text in each case in the form it took on in the period being examined, but such textual and contextual complexity suffices to show how, even when following the most strictly synchronic approach, historicity is unavoidable: though previously cut down to size and expelled from the textual paradise, it comes back in again with all its temptations and challenges. Such are the very zest of every venture in hermeneutics.

It remains for us to examine the most fascinating and inaccessible level of the three phases in gospel stratification set out above: phase (1) concerned with Christ's preaching and so with his historical figure. Some diachronic and genetic observations are necessary before we start, and here, as soon as our view broadens to include the formation of Christianity, with its sources documented and consequently visible, the logical and chronological sequence by which to describe the consolidation of the gospel tradition becomes inverted.

Historical-critical research has made us aware of this chronological

inversion. We have to bear it in mind in dealing with the sources, and broadly speaking, I have adhered to the following order: the edited version of the four Gospels that became canonical with the passage of time; the preaching of Paul and the composition of the Pauline letters; and the public teaching of the historical Jesus. We are thus presented with a hermeneutic paradox: in terms of their priority, the texts and documents of these three phases are in inverse order to the theological and religious developments. The most recent stratum goes back to the drafting of the gospel texts after the Jewish-Roman war, with the possible exception of Mark, conjectured by some scholars to date from immediately prior to the catastrophe in 70;[28] the Pauline phase, including the surviving authentic letters, provides the earliest Christian texts available to us; and finally the absolutely earliest point in time, properly described as Jesuan (i.e., related to the historical Jesus)—rather than as Christic, Christological, or Christian—the initial moment when Jesus emerges into history, a point determined over recent centuries but unsupported by documentary evidence since all the sources are indirect and date from several decades later. This acknowledgment is discouraging in itself, but has become incurable like the wound of Sophocles's Philoctetes or Richard Wagner's Amfortas because of a methodological and conceptual spell that seems difficult or impossible to overcome these days in the academic environment.

However, the absence of documentary evidence does not mean there is no historical evidence, an obvious distinction that occurs to scholars too seldom, since they often uphold the idea of history as a process of checking official records, with everything outside them wrapped in a fog of uncertainty, or rather a matter of faith, a conceptual superimposition that could hardly be more revealing and more modern. In this way, the typically modern division of Kant's noumenon—what is only thinkable but not knowable contrary to phenomenon—had the worst repercussions on a religious message whose kernel is the opposite experience, the experience of an unknown reality becoming fully knowable in Christ. And to make matters even worse, there was a general oblivion of Kant's regulative function of metaphysics in restoring the idea of totality at the level of thinking. In spite of that, the idea of totality, like Parsifal's spear, shows itself to be the remedy as well. We should react to the anobjectual setting of current human and historical sciences not with a sterile opposition, but by using their contributions and showing how,

from their very phenomenal appearance, it becomes possible to detect the totality of phenomena that should be the purpose of any serious inquiry faithful to its object.

In short, we reach the "one thing needful" (Lk 10:24), what can be rediscovered and understood about the real figure of Jesus of Nazareth, taking his historical existence as established, supported as it is by more independent evidence than for other figures in antiquity.[29] We will begin by framing the issues relating to him in a methodological perspective, involving the historical and denominational legitimacy of the religion he inspired as well. A fascinating intellectual landscape is opening before us, surprisingly not understood in its real importance, evidently for the opposite ideological and/or fideistic interests always at the ready on this battlefield. A survey of the main trends in interpretation of the subject can help us to clear up our cognitive field at least from the most encumbering obstacles.

## 4. The Brainteaser of Jesus the Object

The question of who Jesus really was itself became a battlefield in the Age of Enlightenment. In the second half of the eighteenth century Gotthold Ephraim Lessing published anonymously some parts of a posthumous work written by his friend Hermann Samuel Reimarus, where Jesus is interpreted as a Jewish nationalist that the Romans crucified for a failed rebellion.[30] It is the official beginning of the quest for the historical Jesus brilliantly reconstructed by Albert Schweitzer up to the early twentieth century.[31] Since then this topic has proved increasingly to be an arena for demystifications that aspired to liberate from religious prejudice and superstition once and for all, and for defensive barriers set up to oppose them and from behind which to pronounce anathemas against anyone who would treat Jesus as a historical figure no different from any other, as if the dogma of Christ's dual nature, human and divine, did not involve fully sharing human nature. But Schweitzer leaves out an interpretive history that is both earlier and contemporary with this debate and no less important, since it paved the way for the historical and exegetic research while preserving possibilities different from such foreseeable divisiveness. I am referring to the history of the philosophical interpretations of Jesus's figure.

Modern philosophy has elaborated a rational Christology not directly useful to historical-critical ends but highly relevant because it introduces a third criterion rationally verifiable that represents a sort of medium, though incomplete, whether aporetic or merely outlined, between skeptical demystification and fideistic acceptance. We find this third way in Spinoza and Kant, and starting from Kant it immediately leads to the juvenile Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's *Life of Jesus,* and reaches its mature form in David Friedrich Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu kritisch bearbeitet* (*Life of Jesus Critically Examined*), which undoubtedly became the seminal book for any future research on the historical Jesus when it appeared. Therefore, we do not lack philosophical and historical clues to approach the subject with greater calm and balance, that is, with greater objectual respect for it. And it is altogether less arduous than the contradictory and contradicted results of the debate might suggest. The invisible wall created by the absence of documents can in fact be breached, and the way through lies in documentation hidden in the sources that have come down to us.

Researchers looking for the historical Jesus have suggested criteria for assessing the chances of a particular passage or episode containing information from the noumenal phase (1), and John Paul Meier has been particularly helpful in clearly defining them for the practical ends of researchers.[32] The following appear to me to be the more valid and verifiable of these. The criterion of *various witness* (Meier: multiple attestation[33]) where a saying or testimony is present in two or more sources and/or in several forms, though in my opinion identifying forms is subordinate to identifying sources; applying this criterion also depends on the stemma followed in reconstructing the sources themselves. The criterion of *dissimilarity* (or difference) where certain elements differ from the theological images and/or ethical norms followed by the Judaic and Christian communities;[34] this can be subdivided into a criterion of *discontinuity,* if there are objective differences in respect to the Judaic environment ex ante and to the Christian ex post, and a criterion of *embarrassment* where those differences have caused interpretive difficulties,[35] and this relates to the Christian community at this point. This criterion implies a corresponding criterion of *similarity* or *continuity* as well, generally subordinate to the previous criterion in the sense that it becomes more meaningful once put beside what seems to be more original and specifically Jesuan. The criterion of *consistency,* to be mainly applied to

other teachings or actions that can be independently attributed to Jesus. The criterion of the *Crucifixion* (Meier: rejection and execution[36]), concerning the motives for condemning Jesus to death, because his ideas were incompatible with those of the Jewish and Roman social groups he had dealings with: this is an extreme application of the dissimilarity criterion but needs to be emphasized on account of the major role of the Crucifixion in establishing the Christian movement.

Minor criteria might be added to the list, and it varies from author to author; and besides, almost everything depends on the sensitivity and competence with which criteria are applied. Certainly, if these and other evaluative parameters are to be applied adequately, it is necessary to know something about the texts, their linguistic register, the language they are written in, the exegetical methods to be used, and the theological and ethical content involved, as well as the history and culture of the period. Since no one commentator is likely to possess all the necessary knowledge, we may add that it would be enough to be aware of the problem, at least, and gather as much information as possible from the more reliable publications in less well-known areas, then to bring it to interact together, starting from an overall view of the context. What I want to say is that applying single criteria is of little use if they are detached from an overall interpretation of the age and cultures involved. This includes the civilizations the Jews had interacted with for centuries, producing repercussions that reached even as far as rural Galilee where Jesus grew up and in all probability began his mission. A transition has to be made from mechanically accumulating interpretations and criteria to a more organic, qualitative melding of information to obtain a more all-round view.

The choice of twelve disciples or apostles for Jesus's mission provides a minor but pregnant example of what I mean. This reflects the traditional mythical symbolism of the twelve tribes of Israel and refers to an apocalyptic scenario in which the followers of Jesus represent Israel as a whole for its definitive salvation.[37] This symbolic, performative action fits several criteria: first, various witness, since it is documented by different sources; second, discontinuity, both Judaic and Christian, seeing that we know of no other choice of this kind in contemporary Judaism, though there are clear connections to the Middle-Judaic environment (subordinate continuity), while discipleship as an institution soon disappeared from the Christian tradition,

there being no reason to continue with it once the personality of Jesus had passed from the scene; and last, the criterion of consistency in relation to the other information we have about Jesus's teaching. There are therefore valid reasons to support the historicity of this piece of information, but this is only the start of our crypto-documental analysis; now we must set it in a credible context, without the specialist blinkers that prevent some scholars from seeing anything outside their own particular field. The atmosphere here would seem to be entirely ultra-Judaic, not without a certain ruffling of the peaceful, universalistic image of the rabbi of Nazareth, but it is not quite so. In fact, whether conscious or not, Hellenistic influence, in the shape of the wandering philosophers with their disciples flocking after them, can be recognized in Jesus's choice. This idea spurred Crossan to conjecture Jesus as descending from the school of cynic philosophers,[38] but there is no need for such bizarre hypotheses, given that the model of the sage wandering with his disciples was widespread in the cultural milieu of the Roman Empire, in which Jesus took part to some extent as is shown by his idea of the Kingdom of God, *basileia tou theou,* a translation of *imperium Romanum* transformed into the *imperium* of divine love.[39]

In Jesus's choice of twelve disciples we can perceive a spatial and familial uprooting that substantially modifies the picture of a preacher confined to the narrow borders of Galilee and implicitly suggests a new critical meaning for the universalism apparently excluded. The twelve representatives of Israel first of all must follow Jesus, but the potentially universal meaning of their role might give a historical origin also to their mission during Jesus's life to go and preach wherever possible throughout Israel, a mission that implied sooner or later crossing the Galilean and Judaic frontier. The Hellenistic wise men's home was the world, and there is no reason to deny this universalistic scope to the representatives and ambassadors of the Kingdom of God. Without going too far in the opposite direction of the ultra-Judaic interpreters, we arrive at a composite evaluation, more stimulating than one-sided simplification of the data. These preliminary remarks leave the difficulties and reservations still unresolved but couched in manageable discourse. And all this must be thoroughly examined since we have still to check the reconstructable context to be invoked in order to see what it consists in.

There is, however, one further heuristic difficulty of definition that must be dealt with now: we become increasingly immersed in the Judaic sphere as

we go backward in time through the three retrograde phases outlined above, with the result that it is hard to make out the object-Jesus, and as a consequence of this, the object-Christianity disappears. This vanishing effect, as it were, has been exacerbated by applying the criteria of present-day studies in history and the humanities to early Christianity and Jesus. The knowledge we have so far gained is not only that Jesus never intended to found a new religion but that Christianity itself took shape over several decades and was not recognizable as such until sometime after the year 70, having been a movement within Judaism for the first decades and, moreover, subdivided into various tendencies and communities, each with its own interpretation of the figure and message of Jesus. In themselves all these observations can be endorsed, underlining the need to sweep aside all the harmonizing and idealizing reconstructions proposed over the centuries ever since the dawn of Christianity. Nevertheless, the tendency that we might call socioanthropological has taken the consequences of these premises to an extreme, namely, that it is not correct to talk of Christianity before the various movements inspired by it amalgamated at the turn of the first century, and that, from a religious point of view, there was nothing about Jesus to distinguish him from the variegated Judaic milieu.[40] From a neo-Kantian phase, where the Jesuan noumenon was declared unknowable, we shift to the neopositivistic or rather postmodern phase, where any noumenon, both Jesuan and Christic, is simply declared not to exist.

As a consequence, Christianity comes to lose all historical and ultimately religious legitimacy, since it has always grounded its origins in a historical foundation. The socioanthropological approach has no hesitation in applying its own postmodern criteria of analytical and perspectivist deconstruction, rejecting all other criteria of interpretation and definition, starting with the criteria followed by its chosen target, taking it for granted the Christian tradition was mistaken, and simply brushing aside the massive apparatus of interpretation and argument set up to demonstrate and embody an essential continuity: a nominalistic logic prevails whereby it is forbidden to recognize what came after in what came before, and to give it a name to make recognizable. But in that way, surely, it becomes impossible to describe all long-term cultural and historical phenomena, since they cannot help but have scarcely visible beginnings far removed from later developments. The recognizability of historical periods thus fades away and vanishes, as Michel Foucault

maintains in *L'archeologie du savoir,* whereas methodological common sense teaches us that general distinctions help us find our bearings in what would otherwise be an unrelated chaos of data, while always remembering the margin of simplification and convention inherent in all human means to understanding.

But it is not even a question of appealing to common sense, which is, after all, an empty vessel and easily filled with individual prejudices unless it is brought to focus on cognitive goals that go beyond it. All these tendencies suffer from one basic flaw, coming from the real noumenon of our time, now become an unthinkable, an a-noumenon: they ignore the mediatory conditions for accessing reality and their objectual purposes; as a result, they mistake the penury of mediation and object that characterizes the present historical-cultural situation, for a permanent datum applicable to all ages. This observation appears even more compelling for a movement such as Christianity, where the central experience has always been Christ's mediation and his promise of objectual redemption. An authentically rational method must take account of this characteristic phenomenologically, of the appeal it makes, in common with its Jesuan and early Christian roots, to a divine source of truth that is inseparable from the person who appears as its authoritative and authorized exponent. To accept this constant is not necessarily to share its assumptions but only to take the historical phenomenon of Christianity as it appears to the beholder.

Interestingly, those who would tear Christianity apart à la Foucault mostly refrain from any equally radical dissection of Judaism, slavishly following the widespread criterion that traces Jesus in toto to contemporary Judaism, as if that solved the problems whereas, on the contrary, it poses them to their full extent. Clearly, we need to use interpretive methods that, from within, also modify the usual parameters applied in interpreting Middle Judaism and Judaism as a whole, as I tried to do in the Intermezzo. Only conventional reconstructions prevent us from seeing the powerful ferments running through Judaism, like fault lines in rock, always about to erupt to the surface; they prevent us, that is, from recognizing the extremely intense, repeated interaction with the surrounding and dominant cultures, as well as the bond, or double bond, that unites Christianity and Judaism, and unites them for the same reasons that it divided them. We must forget the pseudo-explanation of opposition which was formed in the course of time on a basis

of misunderstanding and, instead, must embrace the very different and credible scenario of an intra-Judaic religious struggle with no holds barred, fought within religious boundaries far more permeable than official versions are prepared to admit; and we must also recognize the long-term shaping influence on Judaism of a pervasive identity crisis, dating back to before the tragic episode of Zerubbabel, to the time of the prophets' struggles against a destiny that constantly threatened their community.

This more internal and detailed reconstruction proves to be suitable for retrieving irreplaceable historical knowledge from the various layers of the tradition and traces a line that must not be broken up artificially, since the causes of division went hand in hand with unifying factors and turned to total religious divorce when the Temple (and symmetrically anti-Temple) system collapsed disastrously on itself, giving rise to the two most vital and adaptable movements, the Pharisaic and the Christian. Nevertheless, we have yet to gain access to a reconstruction of this type, since, first of all, before arguing the even partial validity of New Testament writings as historical, documental, and crypto-documental sources, we must clear the ground of a mass of mistakes and misunderstandings that still encumber it; only then can we approach the real mediatory and objectual tenor of the figure of Jesus and of the texts telling us about it.

The first stage in my argument would in itself require a wide-ranging review of the extensive literature on the demythologizing of Christ and the religion that bears his name, and I shall dwell upon some historic and philosophical moments important in the formation of such research. However, this particular branch of nonfiction, even when publications lacking any scientific method are omitted, contains *topoi*, that is, recurrent themes, repeated or varied according to the creative powers of the author, and so it may suffice just to look at one scholar's interpretation of Christ and Christianity as representing and summarizing them all. The scholar in question is the Semitist Garbini, who has done very useful work in gaining a more realistic picture of the Judaic religion and culture in its troubled and no less misinterpreted history. Drawing on theses put forward elsewhere in previous writings, Garbini has brought together his ideas about Jesus and Christianity in a short book emblematically devoted to the life and myth of Jesus.[41] It will prove worthwhile to devote a section to a critical assessment of the results of his work as representative of the tendencies of current postmodern research.

## 5. Garbini's Mythical Jesus

Let us begin with the author's bias toward the Judaic religion itself. In regard to the birth of Judaic monotheism Garbini subscribes to the popular theory of monotheism as a fanatical, intolerant form of religion, the result, in his opinion, of its close involvement with political power.[42] This is a very unconvincing explanation, since every religious mediation of any importance, in Greece no less than at Rome or in Israel, has needed the support of political institutions that derived their legitimacy from the mediatory source of the religion. So the correct charge to make against monotheisms would be that they concentrated all political power in their single divinity, but this, too, conflicts with the historical evidence: we find numerous discrepant interpretations, tendencies, and interests, even in the apparently monolithic monotheism of Islam. Moreover, Garbini makes no mention of a principle active in Christianity, and so original and nonconformist that it can be safely attributed to Jesus: "Render therefore to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's" (Mt 22:21), a sentence that declares God's spiritual sovereignty over man and removes authority in sacred matters from Caesar, at the same time that it recognizes his right to command in a worldly sphere.[43] The antihistoricity of modern attitudes discrediting monotheism emerges from their overt or hidden assumption that polytheism would be better. But Garbini himself, without going back to the savagery of Dionysian cults in ancient Greece as dramatically represented in the ritual dismemberment (*sparagmos*) of Pentheus in Euripides's *Bacchae*, documents the widespread and ruthless practice of human sacrifice among Semitic peoples, that is, in cults condemned by the Bible as pagan. The end of this practice came with the introduction of Yahwistic henotheism and its evolution into monotheism, although Garbini sees the change as imposed externally by the Persian Empire, disregarding the criticism of ritual murder already made by the prophets in the preexilic period, which he nonetheless recognizes as historical.

He rounds off his attack on monotheism by presenting it as essentially a religious tendency developed by priests skilled in drafting and shaping texts at will so as to have them accepted as sacred by the credulous masses, a disarmingly rationalistic theory that makes one nostalgic for Voltaire and the stylistic luster he could give to such banalities some centuries ago. This is not to say there was no manipulation in Judaism: there were manipulations, as

in all religions. At their best the results of Garbini's research are illuminating and bring out the twists and turns in the history of the Bible's editing and compilation going back to the decisive compositional and editorial phase of second century BC,[44] which confirms Spinoza's brilliant conclusions. On the other hand, he has no idea that the great religious mediations cannot result simplistically from ideologies worked out in theory, but arise from religious and cultural factors that manage to find a common denominator and a credible and shared, objectual direction; usually this occurs under the influence of powerful personalities giving expression to widely felt social needs deriving from critical issues that it has become urgent and vital to resolve. Once a religious mediation starts to assert itself, mystification and propaganda maneuvers are not slow to appear; this is not yet a cause, establishing the mediation, but a consequence reflecting a mediatory process already under way.

The rationalist limitations of Garbini's approach are plain to see when he comes to deal with the rise of Christianity and the figure of its eponymous founder. As he sees it, nothing of what was to become Christianity was present in the preaching of the prophet from Nazareth, and the birth of a new religion was the result of fraud on two accounts. First, before 70, a minority group of highly cultivated priests intuited hidden possibilities in the figure of a religious leader of charismatic appeal but destined to sink into oblivion after an ignominious death by crucifixion; they seized on this figure to make it into a Messianic personality of divine provenance, whose death took on value as expiation and fulfilled what had been foretold in the scriptures.[45] However, the decisive step was taken after 70, when the church in Rome wiped out the previous phase dominated by the church in Jerusalem and by such embarrassing characters as James "the brother of the Lord,"[46] whom Garbini considers to be a uterine sibling of Jesus.

Incidentally, Garbini uses the so-called brother of the Lord to strike at the myth of the Son of God: he interprets the otherwise unknown *Iose* (Joses), whose name appears with James in some passages in Mark, as "a clumsy textual corruption of the name of Jesus,"[47] and then, by identifying James with James the son of Alphaeus, he goes so far as to identify this Alphaeus as Jesus's real father but fails to mention that the identification of the two Jameses had already been suggested by St. Jerome, who found no difficulty in conjecturing James as a cousin of Jesus—but the whole matter remains

debatable.[48] I shall return to this vexed question of brother or cousin relationship in another chapter, and will only make a comment on methodology here. The parenthetical, and deliberately provocative, reference to Alphaeus as father of Jesus reveals Garbini's procedure: he sets out with a preconception that the only logical reading is that James and Jesus are uterine siblings, basically because this goes against the positions of texts previously stated to be unreliable. It is symptomatic that, although the cousinhood interpretation is not discussed, he has no difficulty about admitting the possibility, at least in theory, of understanding *adelphe* as cousin in regard to another hypothetical relative of Mary.[49] But the point he really wants to arrive at is the mendacity of the church of Rome.

A masterpiece of Roman propaganda was the invention of the martyrdom of Peter and Paul in the imperial capital; on this propaganda basis the texts destined to become canonical and put together in the New Testament were fashioned or interpolated. To assert its primacy, the Roman church contrived the composition of the philo-Petrine Gospels, Mark and Matthew, and assimilated to them the Gospel of Luke, written at Antioch but duly Romanized and expanded by adding the Acts of the Apostles. The latter are considered bogus by Garbini and responsible, moreover, for creating the fiction of Paul as apostle to the Gentiles, whereas, in his opinion, Paul was an activist wholly within Judaism. Last in time comes the Gospel of John, also of independent origin but "the condition of the text as it reaches us is such as to make it doubtful that it is a single unified script and not rather a clumsy amalgam of various works";[50] so, what we have here is a text in tatters with no organic unity, but it is for that very reason that it adds to our historical information and transmits scraps of Jesus's original teaching. Similar tampering would have occurred in preparing the Pauline corpus, whose oldest texts were eliminated as incompatible with the form Christianity took after 70.

Garbini's arguments lay claim to being philological but they are a perfect example of what happens when Lupieri's sensible observations, reported above, go unheeded. In Garbini's view, the canonical Gospels and New Testament writings are practically devoid of historical value apart from some chance, contradictory information; and, as is typical with approaches of this type, most of the support for his arguments comes from texts outside the canon, especially the *Gospel of Thomas*. Though poor from a historical-narrative viewpoint, since the *logia* it consists of are often detached from

each other, this is undoubtedly an important document. The fact that *Thomas* reflects a Gnostic stance is no obstacle for Garbini since, as he sees it, while Gnosticism added something of its own, it largely conserved the historical teaching of Jesus. And so pride of place goes to sources outside the canon to the detriment of the canonical works, invalidated by their falsifying, antihistorical intent, and there are even references to lost works, such as the Aramaic *Matthew,* completely different from the extant Matthew and of which few fragments survive, because of the Christian *damnatio memoriae.*[51] On this source, at any rate, Garbini has given an interesting contribution on which I shall say something more below.

Thus armed, Garbini's iconoclasm spares nothing and nobody. Skipping over the accounts of the childhood of Jesus and ignoring their theological and figural meaning, he rejects the historicity of the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist in the River Jordan, the motive being that their teachings were poles apart;[52] attributes Peter's thrice-repeated denial to a desire on the part of the Roman church to throw his figure into relief;[53] and dismisses the idea that Jesus might ever have used any sort of Messianic title in speaking of himself, including the most archaic title of all, Son of man.[54] But above all he accuses the evangelists or their manipulators of distorting and covering up the rabbi of Nazareth's original message of love, a message inspired by the open-minded vision of the Song of Songs and its exaltation of God as Love, and blames their male chauvinism for censoring the prime defining feature of his preaching, the absolute parity between men and women. Only faint traces of this survive in the canonical Gospels, whereas in Gnostic writings it is recognizable in the privileged role assigned to women, particularly to Mary Magdalene who is represented as a redeemed prostitute in love with Jesus; and, to a certain extent, her sentiments are requited since the author gives a hint of Jesus as a kind of Palestinian flower child, open to all kinds of amorous experience.[55] Garbini is so thoroughly convinced of this theory of his that he denies any historical credibility to the teaching or, as he sees it, to the imposition of "an impossible love" for one's enemies, and has no hesitation in adding that "forgiveness is not love."[56]

When the gospel message is treated like this, we might well say what Jesus says prophetically in the synoptic Gospels in regard to the Temple, namely, that there shall not be left one stone upon another. Which is not surprising, seeing the nonchalant way in which Garbini dismisses the fourth

Gospel as an inorganic, shapeless textual assemblage, completely ignoring the profundity that makes it not only a consistent, unified work, save for glosses and school contributions, but also an all-time masterpiece of Christian thinking. Equally unacceptable is the denial of Paul's apostolate among the pagans, and it is soon confuted by a cursory glance at the apostle's theological ideas. Likewise, in considering potentially historical information about Jesus and his followers, Garbini never thinks of the criterion of dissimilarity, though one of its most sensational applications is precisely in this denial by Peter, so much so that even today the episode provokes defensive rationalizations from exegetes and theologians, as if it revealed a peculiar weakness of character in the chief apostle. Counter to such psychologism, René Girard is right to remind us of the universal value of the episode, in which we can all recognize a human attitude to betrayal that is the most overwhelming truth contained in the accounts of the Crucifixion,[57] quite apart from any convictions we may have about Christian claims regarding Jesus's divine parentage. To mistake this for Petrine propaganda is a paralogism that refuses to read the texts for what they say—indeed, for what they show. So there is nothing strange about Garbini drawing the antitextual, antihistorical conclusion that Jesus's message "contained nothing new theologically" but had at the same time a "profoundly innovative character,"[58] and boils down in the end to spreading the message of free love and sexual equality extolled in the Song of Songs among ordinary folk.

The Crucifixion ends up being the preferred victim for this kind of treatment. Garbini accepts its historicity but denies it any theological or religious significance at all: his Jesus is totally antisacrificial, and the words from the cross recorded in Mark and Matthew, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?," are accordingly reinterpreted. Garbini regards the quotation from Psalm 22 as historical but very much toned down, since the corresponding verb in Hebrew carried the meaning of "sacrificing."[59] The phrase thus reinterpreted becomes a protest by the dying Jesus against the sacrificial value of his death, knowing it to be comparable to the *molk* ritual,[60] originally in the Ancient Near East the sacrifice of the king's child. This is an interesting admission on Garbini's part, seeing that, in order to sustain his thesis, he is forced to concede a degree of awareness to Jesus that he never mentions elsewhere. In other words, by drawing back from the developments of his more serious findings, he removes from the picture a

possibility I have already suggested, and will argue for later on: the possibility that Jesus's rightful place is in the heated debate over the legitimacy of the cult in Jerusalem and the real nature of the Yahwistic religion. Garbini is only re-presenting, with variations due to the buzzwords prevailing in our present culture, Friedrich Nietzsche's depiction of Christ in *The Antichrist* as a dreamer on the verge of hebephrenia, the difference being that Nietzsche had behind him his discovery of the noumenon of the death of God.[61] That led eventually to a revealingly destructive end in madness, so he would appear to be a very dubious model for anyone unwilling to follow in his cognitive footsteps, and it goes without saying that there are times when the good rules of scientific research would suffice to save one from cutting a poor figure.

In his bold and hazardous foray into Christianity Garbini piles up a great many tendentious reconstructions that any competent analysis will immediately show to be baseless, and yet he sometimes has hit upon insights quite remarkable. The main one of these is presented in a later and posthumously published essay devoted to the Aramaic *Matthew,*[62] where the hypotheses on the existence of this source and its use by Luke and Matthew help to disentangle several problems involved in the hypothesizing of Q. Worth trying to verify is the further conjecture by which Garbini seeks to explain the disappearance of the Aramaic *Matthew* as due to its Judaizing interpretation of the figure of Jesus, which the evangelists would have deemed incompatible with their own Christology. The conjecture must not be rejected tout court; to evaluate it raises the complex problem of the relation between Jesus and his Judaic milieu and requires besides a reliable reconstruction of Jesus's theology for which Garbini's approach is clearly insufficient. Until we would acquire the interpretive tools we need to reconstruct Jesuan thinking, we may to some extent agree with his observation that the revolutionary characterization of God as love has, in the Christian tradition, more often than not been pushed off into the shade. And it is appropriate to devote some remarks to the subject, confirming the usefulness as provocation of Garbini's impetuous interpretations.

The founding texts of Christianity are charged by Garbini with concealment, but they are not responsible for hiding anything, though they show a certain stylistic reserve because they want the believer to grasp the love that Jesus talks about, to understand its true nature and not mistake it for

the *eros* of the Greek and Platonic tradition. In this respect, the opposition between *eros* and *agape* emphasized by Anders Nygren is not arbitrary and may usefully be put in contrast with Garbini's extremism.[63] The early Christians thought of sexuality as a demonic force to be kept constantly in check, and the evidence suggests that Jesus shared this conviction to some extent: carnal love was always a very powerful intermedial force in antiquity, and as a divine force it was logical for it to be traced back to Christ's saving mediation or vice versa exorcized. At the same time, Nygren's reaction goes too far: his definition of *eros* by no means coincides with sensual love and does take into account Plato's distinction between "'vulgar (πάνδημος) Eros' and 'heavenly (οὐράνιος) Eros,'" but only to harshly state that precisely the "heavenly Eros . . . , in its most sublimated and spiritualized form, is the born rival of the idea of Agape," that is of the "theocentric relationship to God" having nothing to do with "'acquisitive love' nor 'the love of friendship.'"[64] This viewpoint is not so distant from Girard's and doomed to the same serious drawbacks since it does not recognize the human need for an attainable object and a mediation capable of giving it: an antiobjectual, nonmediatory God is a modern caricature of the Christian God, and the dismissal of the Platonic *eros* as a spiritualized version of sensual love proves to be antihistorical. Not by chance these one-sided and polemical statements end up with the image of "the born rival." Modern critics such as Nygren and Garbini (besides Girard himself) find the rivalry they had decided to look for from the very start, but if we stand apart from their extremism, they unwillingly help us to trace back the original thoughts of Jesus.

Both Nygren's adversarial reconstruction and Garbini's destructive iconoclasm completely miss the profundity of Jesus's thinking, which is apparent from another circumstance: Jesus's sharing the assertion in Genesis that man and woman were created to be "one flesh" (Gn 2:24, in Mk 10:6–8 and Mt 19:4–5), which provides the theological basis for the daring interpretation given by the Song of Songs and sounds authentic in its radicalism.[65] Thus, as Jesus conceives it, once the loving mediation of the Kingdom is established, carnal love also becomes legitimate and saintly, but it can only be reached through a course of purification and renunciation that leads to discovering the overwhelming significance of divine love, willing to make any sacrifice whatever in order to save humankind. And undoubtedly the Gospels, along with all the other New Testament texts, transmit this teaching; the accent

may differ, but their overall fidelity remains. To deny that the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew contains a lesson about love with a core of inspiration going back to Jesus is to deny the textual evidence, and to make the mistake of identifying sexual love with love *tout court,* which makes no sense in itself quite apart from any Christian thesis. The exalted, liberating vision of love we quite rightly trace back to Jesus was, and still is, partially obscured; this is due not only to normal human insensitivity witnessed in every age but also to theological ideas becoming involved with political interests hundreds of years later. Dante, with his spiritual Christianity, fought those ideas in medieval times, thereby showing, on the contrary, how the good news of God's freely given, forgiving love had been transmitted and preserved over the centuries in spite of all the obscurity, indeed on account of it.

An observation to be subscribed to, though it is a popular image and not found in the gospel texts as Garbini maintains, is that Jesus became "an untiring miracle-worker without family or close affections, a lone figure waiting to be killed to become god."[66] Naturally Garbini rejects the Christological principle of preexistence and traces everything to Christianity's distortion of sacrifice, which does not alter the fact that the schematic interpretation of Jesus he attacks is widespread and mythographic in character. The human aspects of Jesus have been impoverished and transfigured beyond all historical and psychological probability for far too long not to arouse legitimate protest, which is not to say there is no truth in the religious mission and self-awareness attributed to him by the Gospels. As we shall see when we come to comment on John, not by chance totally disregarded by Garbini as a work of independent thought, the loss of credibility of an image of Jesus that is too metaphysical and theological for us is partly, if not mainly, due to the decline of the mediatory language that once made it possible to understand the Christological interpretations of his figure in a different, convincing way. And we can agree with Garbini on the other point he stresses, that is, the central place allotted to women by Jesus, an anomaly incompatible with the mentality of society at that time with the result that the final versions of the Gospels try to reduce and marginalize it—not, however, to the point of eliminating it altogether, since Christian theology, which Garbini dismisses en bloc as a mythological and ideological construct, took it into Mariology, with ideas about women of unfathomed profundity and surprising modernity.

Returning to the historical axioms that are the foundation of Garbini's arguments, it should be noted that there are no grounds for the abnormal weight he assigns to the church in Rome: no church in the first two centuries had the power to impose its doctrinal and textual choices on the others, as the antiquity and liturgical use of the canon of the four Gospels goes to show;[67] and when Rome took part in choosing the New Testament canon as a whole, it was done in agreement with the Eastern churches.[68] It is worth remembering that in the fourth-century Christological disputes, despite the prestige coming from Peter, the influence of Rome was not equal to the ambitions of its bishops, and it had nowhere near the influence of the powerful and refined Greek-language churches. Control was indeed exercised by Rome (as later by Constantinople) but not so early as to condition and distort the drafting of the Gospels around the end of the first century and first part of the second. And while it is true that not a few Christian texts considered anomalous or inconvenient disappeared, this took place over a long period of time: it first appeared in the sixth-century anti-Origenian persecution, above all in the East; then, in the iconoclastic destructions above all in the eighth century; and finally the provisions for normalization and religious control already introduced in late antiquity and, especially, in the Middle Ages, both in the East and the West. With regard to the martyrdom of Peter and Paul at Rome, the evidence in favor is by no means inconsiderable and has to be admitted if we are prepared to allow the earliest testimonies even the smallest share of historical validity.[69] Reconstructing the religious profile of James the brother of Jesus is more problematic, but leaving aside for the moment the question of his uterine sibling relationship, research into early Christianity focusing on this figure has made it possible to explore positions once traced to so-called Judeo-Christianity without, however, producing any great upsets in what we know:[70] what has emerged so far is an archaic form of Christianity still within the Middle-Judaic context, and subsequently obliterated, not through some grim resolve for *damnatio* but simply because history took another direction, toward differentiation and religious opposition.[71] In any case, the phenomenological approach of my inquiry is not concerned to reconstruct the careers of the first apostles in detail; what matters is that their martyrdom has been taken by the tradition as the greatest sign of their faith in Christ, based on the Crucifixion as a historical event. And here we come to the crucial nub of the

story of the historical Jesus, to be approached using adequate means, very different from those of Garbini.

## 6. The Historical Jesus

The question of the historical Jesus—that is, of Jesus understood as a historical figure that we can reconstruct applying the methods of historical sciences today—presents us with the second great revolution in interpretation, more or less parallel in time to the demythologizing studies of classical antiquity, and offers us another forbidden fruit from the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, the more forbidden in this case since it came to touch on the *sancta sanctorum* of the religious tradition of the West, the very origin of this symbolic prohibition, and significant, more than for its content, for adding in a mythical way the ingredient that desire is made stronger by interdiction (as Georges Bataille will teach us), and, that the genesis of humankind is linked to a subsequent prohibition of some kind and to a capacity for converting it to knowledge.

It is no accident that Nietzsche, who led the way in demythologizing Greece, should aspire to a similar role in respect to the life of Christ by launching an all-out attack on D.F. Strauss, whose initial researches in the field had produced the most notable results. Strauss is the target of a mercenary, petty-minded polemic in the first *Untimely Meditation,* a venomous attack oozing with envy of Strauss's role in demystifying Christianity, a role that Nietzsche wanted all for himself, still suffering from the delusion that he could become Dionysus, take Wagner's place, and become the divine spouse of Cosima-Ariadne. Besides, he had good reason to be envious: the amateurish way in which this extoller of Dionysus set about the task, followed by a host of imitators, is clear from his later efforts, culminating in *The Antichrist;* and once again we should remember he was almost taken by surprise by his most striking intuitions about the subject, at those times when he was not lost in the mental and ideological fog of the progressive dissociation that reached its climax in the crazed *imitatio Christi* of his madness.

In any case, leaving aside for the present the endless paradoxes of Nietzsche's philosophy, it has to be said that the theme of the historical Jesus calls for specific treatment, which cannot be fully presented here. Nor

would it even be advisable, since its huge scale and complexity would be in danger of obscuring the religious and cultural forest of which the Christ-tree is a part, and that forest alone can make us realize its true stature and the exceptional role it won for itself at the high price of being transformed into the tree of the cross. From the time of the Gospel of John, as we shall see, this tree is intentionally linked to the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in order to overturn its significance once and for all and make it a means to set humanity free spiritually. But how can we actually arrive at the historical core of a figure that from its earliest documentation has been swathed in a dense aura of religious and symbolic interpretation, not to mention the obvious possibility that he may well have expressed himself in that way? And how far is it permissible to interpret the figure of Jesus with an approach based on the documental parameters of historiography today, the dangers of which we just saw in the one-way theses of Garbini? A further paradox is that even if we wanted to separate the Jesus of history from the Jesus of faith, we would not only have to adopt subtle historical arguments but rely in any case on some nucleus of faith isolated and verified in historical writings, not to mention that even the event of faith in Jesus appears to have happened historically and appeals to our understanding as such. We cannot ignore history in studying the figure of a religious teacher who intended to renew history, or indeed bring it to an end, but who took the precise historical situation of his listeners as his starting point, that is to say a particular set of circumstances, temporal, spatial, and relational. Without entering into more technical details, these remarks can provide some indications as to method, *methodos*.

What I wish to say is that the problem cannot be correctly framed by setting out historians' tedious and always debatable rules. That is not enough. What we need to do is include all of the components of the problem, from the earliest ones down to the positions taken by interpreters today, important even if peripheral. And here my interpretive criterion according to which myth is the main cognitive tool humanity derived from ritual proves to be appropriate, since the religious figure of Christ undoubtedly reflects a similar process of mythopoeic development correlated to ritual, but has the further factor in the objectual development of a *mythos* that retroacts on the human conditions of its formation, becoming theology in history, divine mediation descending entirely within the human sphere. This will all require more thorough consideration but it will suffice for the moment to outline

a hermeneutic and historical circularity that runs in both directions, from Jesus to us and from us to Jesus. We find from this that the historical figure of Jesus Christ, that is, of the Jesus who became Christ and the Christ who includes the initial Jesus, can be reached if set into a context reconstructed according to historical and theoretical criteria that are inevitably modern but fully justified when pushed all the way and made to retroact with the relevant context. Starting from our own images of the Christ phenomenon we arrive at the disciples' images of him, and from there we can try to arrive at the representations and self-interpretations that Jesus Christ may himself have developed as the main actor, active and passive, in such a far-reaching, profound historical odyssey.

Only a phenomenological, and holistic, procedure of this type can identify and comprehensively sift through whatever original data has come down to us along a chain of transmission whose links become liable to distortion only when we detach them from the historical chain to which they belong. To rephrase this general interpretive comment in more practical terms, we are justified in concluding that there is a dense web of information, linked and interconnected from the start, through which the Jesus phenomenon can be made visible, gradually yielding clues and motives relating to the historical reality of his person, ideas, and actions. While we cannot arrive at any absolute certainty with this method—as is equally true of other methods that are still more partial—we can, on the other hand, reach conclusions that are plausible in the present state of our knowledge and, furthermore, bring a consistent image into focus, with phenomenological value primarily since the figure it gives us is Christological, Christic, and Jesuan—working back through the strata that make up the Christ of Christianity—and that has acted in history at various depths, and might arguably have something to do with the Jesus who actually lived.

But the practical aspects automatically bring theoretical aspects with them and are affected by them. We can manage to keep at the level of a historical figure who in any case has to be considered one of the greatest religious thinkers of all time, without descending into conjectures about the ramifications of his family tree, and without forgetting that any serious historical study needs to check the facts. Except for the essential verification of documents and texts, the coordinates of the argument are not so much philological as methodological and conceptual, which means mostly philosophical in

respect to modern awareness and mostly theological in respect to awareness in antiquity, calling on both to confront and communicate with each other in a single process with one providing clarification where the other provides the content, and vice versa, within a single historical phenomenon.

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The validity of this type of approach is confirmed by its capacity to bring out the reasons underlying past interpretive and religious processes and make them interact with each other and with the present time in which the interpreter lives. Thus we are able to see that the root problem we must tackle and overcome is the noumenal assumption that the historical Jesus remains in principle inaccessible and must not be allowed to prejudice the Jesus of faith. The idea was greatly developed in twentieth-century German Protestant theology but goes back to the crisis in the Christian mediation and to Martin Luther. The mediatory deficiency he perceived—the silence of God, the distressing perception of the *Deus absconditus,* the sense of guilt as the moral reflex of an irremediable rift between man and God—he transformed into the definitive confirmation, "theologoumenal" so to speak and not rational, of the original absoluteness of the divine mediation, which can be given through grace alone, *sola fide,* to those that seek it with no intramundane possibility of finding it. It is only at the end of this dark night, the *noche obscura* the catholic St. John of the Cross wrote about some decades later, that God unexpectedly speaks to us, even if Luther's God does so exclusively *in interiore homine,* in an inner forum, no longer that of St. Augustine, though it borrows his formulae and formulations, because it has lost all objectual ties to the external forum, now the exclusive sphere of the prince and political power.

However, there is a record of those who received the divine grace *ab origine* and so made it possible for others to receive it, that is to say, the Bible, the one true *depositum fidei* that every Christian has the right and duty to draw on. Official church mediation, since it had now degenerated to being a mere facade and an obstacle, could be dispensed with: the principle of *sola Scriptura* therefore came to accompany *sola fide,* in a saving circularity between the heart's faith and the words that witnessed to it, culminating in Christ's definitive witness that salvation was possible and that God had decided to bring it to humankind. To that saving circularity alone was

Luther's Christian to look. And yet the fact that mediation is not available has its effect on the structure of the Lutheran Christ and transforms him into a sort of *unicum,* a Christological compendium of the abyss between man and God that only the latter can cross, unilaterally and inscrutably. Luther's theology concentrates entirely on the moment at which the impassability of that abyss is measured, the death of Christ, and is therefore a *theologia crucis.* But it is consistent in rejecting all the intermedial repercussions that a centuries-old tradition saw in the event, quite horrifying to the modern consciousness of the father of the Reformation: no theory about bloody sacrifice or pagan atonement was to cloud the crystal-clear paradox of absolute grace, only to be hoped for since it was unattainable.

This is the initial nucleus of what was to become, in the twentieth century, Karl Barth's "dialectical" theology, not in the Hegelian sense but with reference to the *apophasis* (negation) of Neoplatonic philosophy, where God is the One who surpasses and negates all attributes and exists beyond Being itself. This results in a mediatory emphasis transcendent and absolute but voided of all objectual content or effects through being vertically one-sided, with every divine mediation paradoxically losing its raison d'être, becoming deobjectualized and deontologized in the extreme, as we also find in the religious conception of Emmanuel Lévinas. Besides, the Hegelian dialectic itself applies its theory of the position, negation, and recomposition (popularly known as thesis, antithesis, and synthesis) to every manifestation of the Spirit, but not to the reality of the single entity or phenomenon, which is, on the contrary, ground down and crushed by a dominating logic. Thus even the Lutheran Hegel comes up with a similar objectual negation in a horizontal and immanent version, for which Søren Kierkegaard, another great Lutheran very polemical against his own church, would reproach him.

And this also served as the initial nucleus for the huge growth and progress of biblical studies in Germany, one of the most important though least considered phenomena of Western civilization. Without the Lutheran break with the mediations of ancient and medieval origin, and without the thorough examination of its religious and theological significance, there would have been no investigation of the historical Jesus; and it is worth mentioning that Western Christianity is the only religion in human history to inquire into the authentic historical origin of its founder with such intrepid resolve. A free interpretation of this sort is quite inconceivable in religions

like Islamism, Buddhism, or Hinduism, but even in Christianity it met with strong opposition: such a study was essentially impossible in Eastern Christianity with the vertical absoluteness of its Christological mediation, while Catholicism itself, though it had already begun in medieval times to check and validate devotional and religious excesses, was taken by surprise by the Protestant revolt. And yet it did not fail to respond by continuing its search for validation and authenticity, albeit at a safe distance. So it is legitimate to treat the whole of Western Christianity as one in this incredible endeavor, while giving due recognition to the Lutheran Reformation for its invaluable role, making the mental and representational break without which the venture would never have gotten under way. Spinoza's exegesis itself can only be understood within the context of Protestant Holland in his day, which enabled him to see the possibility of religious and political tolerance that still lay in the future. His philosophy also reveals a fascinating attempt to resolve the Lutheran dichotomy between divine verticality and human sinfulness in a rational, monistic, and liberating worldview. In this vision the inference drawn *more geometrico* (mathematically) replaces grace and the philosopher's rational texts take the place of ancient scripture, with a consequent application to the biblical texts that served to corroborate and disseminate what had been established intellectually.

These premises gave rise to ideological excesses and distortions in the investigation of the historical foundations of Christianity, but that was amply compensated not only by the historical discoveries resulting from the process but also by the mental freedom it permitted in approaching the enigmatic figure of Christ himself, irrespective of personal positions on the subject. And certain factors would suggest that such mental freedom is to some degree inherent in the initial message, a suggestion that needs to be verified, while it should not go unremarked that these hermeneutic and liberating potentials were inherited from the heated theological debate in Middle Judaism that gave origin to Christianity, while the Bible texts dealing with the debate are more properly considered as its result, selected and edited, rather than its premise. And does not the Lutheran principle of free examination of the scriptures, in itself conceived as an unfiltered approach to a truth still intact within the texts, become more interesting once it is seen as the first modern expression of problems that had a determinate influence on the composition of the texts?

A good deal could be added about the part played by the great seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophers, not only in their cognitive explorations of Christian and Hebrew scriptures, already mentioned in relation to Spinoza, but also in their reconstruction of the figure of Christ in a way compatible with the criteria of modern rationalism. A few remarks will suffice to give an idea of the importance of their contribution, starting with Spinoza before moving on to Kant, whose Christology is hardly less important than his gnosiological revolution.

## 7. The Jesus of the Philosophers: Spinoza and Kant

The figure of Jesus occupies a prominent position in Spinoza's *Tractatus theologico-politicus,* even if the author's intentions are not immediately interpretable, a fact that justifies L. Strauss's theory that the *Tractatus* is skillfully adapted to the prevailing Christian environment in line with Strauss's criteria of reticent writing.[72] This form of written communication, followed in the past by such great philosophers as Al-Farabi and Maimonides, and earlier still by Plato,[73] aimed to convey one's real ideas to the few who were able to understand them, while feigning at many points to share, or not contradict, the convictions of the majority, mostly about religion and superstition. Still, this does not alter the fact, surprisingly overlooked by Strauss, that Christ is the only biblical figure said by Spinoza in the *Tractatus* to have communicated with God *de mente ad mentem,*[74] that is, with an identity of intention, differing from the prophets and Moses himself who communicated with God on the basis of their imagination: "I believe nobody achieved such perfection compared to others as Christ, to whom the divine decrees [*placita*] that lead humanity to salvation were revealed immediately, without words or visions."[75]

These statements are more than just prudent formulations to avoid persecution, and a secret counterproof of this is to be seen in the essential correspondence between the explicit exceptionality of Spinoza's Christ in the Bible, who taught the real divine decrees while keeping real knowledge about God hidden from the masses, and the implicit exceptional nature of the doctrine of Spinoza himself, who teaches real knowledge about God, deriving the real decrees from that knowledge, while he keeps his teaching hidden

from the eyes of the uneducated and stupid. Christ converses *de mente ad mentem* with God; Spinoza converses *de mente ad mentem* with his readers, inviting them to converse rationally together with God. This singular affinity is confirmed by the closeness of many gospel precepts to Spinoza's ideas, starting with charity and meekness of heart that are presented as a logical and ethical consequence of his philosophy. The climax of his major work, the monumental *Ethica,* is reached in book V with the *amor Dei intellectualis.* This *amor* is not to be understood in an abstract or impersonal sense, nor can it be wholly reduced to the *amor fati* of Stoic origin through the causal determinism that human beings discover themselves to be part of, since *amor Dei intellectualis* expresses the cognitive and existential condition of those who have discovered in their own thinking and lives the totality of divine love that loves itself in every one of its parts: "Mentis amor intellectualis erga Deum est ipse Dei Amor, quo Deus se ipsum amat" (The intellectual love of the mind toward God is the same as God's love by which God loves himself).[76] What we see here is an extraordinary reassessment of Parmenides's Being and Aristotle's Unmoved Mover that no longer reflects the cosmic-ontological impersonality of ancient philosophy, since it is the response to a sensibility that can only be defined as Hebraico-Christian.

This presents us with an absolutely original philosophical portrait of Jesus, and also contains a concealed indication of the role Spinoza saw his own philosophy to be playing, marking permanent progress in human reason, but only to definitively reaffirm what had always belonged to the one and only reality and truth of God. This position went decidedly beyond history, and yet the historicity of the Christian revelation remains hidden within Spinoza's hermeneutics, leading the way to further immanent reappraisals of the figure of Christ.

The accusations of atheism and subversion made against Spinoza during his lifetime became universal condemnation after his death, and as a result his outline of a philosophical Jesus practically dropped out of sight. This did not mean, however, that his image of the founder of Christianity had no effect—far from it—but rather that the effect was hidden by a strategy of reticence in the manner of L. Strauss's reticent writing, but conforming to a real religious interest, not an imaginary one. And in fact Spinoza's Christic or Christological idea is found again in Kant's idea of Jesus as the perfect incarnation of the moral law that it is the historical-rational task of humanity as such

to attain, either to be realized at a necessary moment in the distant future or in the unknowable but just as necessary fulfillment of the individual lives of rational beings after death. And the fact that the transition from the one thinker to the other is not so indirect is to be inferred from Kant's esteem for Spinoza. Although he criticized his system as unacceptable and subscribed to the *communis opinio* of Spinoza as an atheist, he also noted, in the *Critique of Judgment,* how Spinoza's confutation of finalities in nature imperfectly anticipates the critical philosophy that was to ascribe teleological judgment to the human mind. But the affinity between the two philosophers goes still deeper. In the *Critique of Judgment,* Kant also recognizes Spinoza's rationalizing and moralizing intentions as laudable but insufficient, to the point of defining him as the prime example of a wise man incapable of correlating his moral propensities to an adequate philosophy that could safeguard transcendence, and therefore the idea of the moral life being fulfilled in a life after death:

> We may therefore consider the case of an upright man (such as Spinoza, for example) who regards himself as quite convinced there is no God and (since, as far as the object of morality is concerned, the consequence is the same) no future life. . . . Deception, violence, and envy will not cease to rage around him, though he himself be honest, peaceful, and benevolent; and nevertheless, other upright men, whom he may encounter besides himself, irrespective of whether they deserve to be happy or not, will be subjected by Nature, who is unconcerned about that, to the misfortunes of poverty, sickness, and early death, exactly as happens to the other animals on Earth, and so forever, until the voracious grave swallows them all (honest and dishonest alike) and casts them—who were able to believe themselves to be the purpose of Creation [*Endzweck der Schöpfung*]—into the depths of meaningless Chaos from whence they came.[77]

Kant inflicts a phenomenal punishment on Spinoza's "upright man" for his mistake in depriving himself of a noumenal hope, and therefore of a metaphysically rational hope, though the empathetic eloquence and tone of the passage betray Kant as being the first to defend himself from the frightening and realistically modern vision of meaningless Chaos ready to swallow anybody who has the misfortune to escape for a few moments from its ruthless, insatiable matrix. Arthur Schopenhauer transformed this

nightmare vision of Kantian phenomenal Nature prisoner of all its appearances (*Erscheinungen*) into noumenon of the Will to live, from which one gains freedom through the denial of *noluntas.* But it will be useful at this point to see how Spinoza's latent Christic and Christological assimilation of himself comes into the open in Kant, and precisely when he makes a symbolic reference to Spinoza for whom he felt a certain empathy.

Kant was secretly obsessed by the distressing image of his just man consigned to the forces of Chaos (a modern version of the just man persecuted in book II of Plato's *Republic*) and turned his attention to the problematic area of religion following the Reformation that had undergone radical revision in Spinoza's metaphysics. Kant's critique, strong in its reflections on the historical human condition in the form of knowledge, takes the Lutheran paradox of the rediscovery of the divine mediation by virtue of its unattainable verticality and translates it into rational terms. This is done by transforming Luther's theological deficit into the logical statement of the division between phenomenon and noumenon, and yet completely reversing the setback, changing it from an endpoint, arrived at in a bitter quarrel with the church of Rome and much of the Christian past, into a point of departure for an unspecified journey into the future involving humanity as a whole. The basis of Kant's philosophy is actually twofold; on the one hand it decrees an absolute limit to human knowledge and, on the other, it sets human awareness moving forward again from that very limit. The initial impulse comes from exploiting the gnosiological dissymmetry, clarified in the *Critique of Pure Reason,* to establish a similar and opposite dissymmetry in the moral domain—that is, the metaphysical domain (*Critique of Practical Reason*)—returning from there to the first asymmetrical domain of the phenomenon and science to throw light on it from the metaphysical and rule-making viewpoint (*Critique of Judgment*). What we see here is a twofold asymmetric rebound, destined to recur as soon as we look at the future progress of humanity, of which noumenal reality becomes the symbol and asymptotic limit.

The consequences of this are also of notable importance in the field of exegesis and religion, since they end by highlighting historicity, humanity's peculiar problem, considering moreover that in doing so they interpret the historical sense of the revelation that is the most unequivocal result of Christianity. Kant's conception of religion finds its major expression in a late work *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der blossen Vernunft* (*Religion within the*

*Bounds of Bare Reason*—1793), where Jesus Christ—the "Gospel Master" (Der Lehrer des Evangeliums) appearing "as an envoy from Heaven" (von Himmel gesandten) and at the same time as the announcer of the "moral faith" of universal rationality accessible to all[78]—is the religious figure who represents at the highest level the "religion of pure reason" (*Vernunftreligion*),[79] that is, the categorical imperative of practical reason, which requires us to treat others always as an end and never as a means, with the aim of bringing about the perfect fulfillment that the church visibly anticipates on earth and the Kingdom of God invisibly fulfills in heaven. It is a strange, paradoxical definition that starts from the separation between the phenomenal and noumenal planes, between reason and revelation, but overturns it in the sense that the supernatural revelation of the positive Christian religion appears to be phenomenal, fideistic, and particular, while the natural religion accessible to all human beings cannot be but noumenal, rational, and universal; and yet, since the meaning of Christ's figure precisely consists in being the full incarnation of this natural religion, it implies mysterious and necessary union of these two planes, previously divided, in his single person, and hence his Christological functioning as an unclassifiable mediator who is both phenomenal and noumenal, rational and fideistic, historically particular and universal. This paradox easily risked dehistoricizing the figure of Jesus, transforming it into a philosophical or moral symbol, but contained in itself the power to set that figure in motion again once its tensional, unifying significance had been recognized and studied in depth.

Kant's line of thinking was immediately taken up by the young Hegel in his *Life of Jesus* (*Das Leben Jesu*—1795, published posthumously),[80] where he attempts to give historical substance to Christ as the incarnation of the Kantian moral imperative through a philosophical and ethical essentializing that was in the spirit of Kant's *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason* and the most advanced German Protestant culture of the period, but envisioned crossing the boundaries of pure reason and reaching a new philosophical synthesis destined to leave behind the genuine religious problems linked to Jesus's figure and the delicate balance of Kant's Christology.

A deeper religious approach, very much in the spirit of Spinoza and Kant, found open expression in the thinking of Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher, whose critical awareness of the historical sides of the New Testament writings is rudely undervalued by Schweitzer, who describes him

"like a spider at work" going back and forth in his abstract dialectic without paying any serious attention to history.[81] Against this polemical caricature, more applicable to some aspects of Hegel's dialectic, it must be said that, on the contrary, Schleiermacher's theology was born from an acute perception of Jesus's historical problem and even a secret despair of finding the historical Jesus behind the fragmentary and incomplete collection of the traditional textual canon.[82] The ghost of the death of God looms over all the great German philosophy between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but Schleiermacher's solution cleverly developed the Spinozian and Kantian idea of elaborating a philosophical/spiritual definition of Jesus's figure, by giving it a mystic significance inseparable from the inward life of the subject facing the experience of the Infinite.[83] Hence his Lutheran choice to privilege Paul's theology and, above all, the neat preference for the Gospel of John, deemed to be the closest to the real Christ and even the only apostolic testimony of his teaching.[84] In this way Schleiermacher reasserted the solid hermeneutic principle that the only pillar of Christian faith is Jesus Christ's mediation, and yet he did not manage to define a proper historical object corresponding to Christ's mediation, so that his hermeneutic and spiritual move remained a defensive decision born from historical consciousness but incapable of giving history its real due.

The result was that the passage for the dichotomy between the Jesus of history and the Jesus of faith was open. Coming back to the philosopher who was the great Schleiermacher's enemy at Berlin university and became the instrumental reference point of D.F. Strauss—namely, Hegel—it must be acknowledged that the project of his youthful work was to trace Kant's mediatory and noumenal Christ *within* historical phenomena, but his lack of a real religious interest left him unable to give substance to this cognitive project, which was philosophically stronger than Schleiermacher's hermeneutic subtlety but theologically far inferior. Hegel wanted to find a Christ-like mediation in his magnificent history of Spirit where, nonetheless, the density of the Christic and Christological problem is substantially lost and traced back to an inner universal need of fulfilment. Speculative philosophy in Hegel ends up looking for the answers entirely in itself, as Kierkegaard complained, and appears to fulfill its function in that way.

It was this unresolved *status quaestionis,* and not the influence of the Hegelian school, that prompted the first organic research into the historical

Jesus: this was D.F. Strauss's *Life of Jesus,* savagely attacked by the young Nietzsche who made a futile attempt in the last months of his conscious existence to set *The Antichrist* in its place.[85] In respect to the Christ portrayed by German philosophers of the time, this *Life of Jesus* introduces us to a totally different order of reflection, precisely because Strauss shrewdly took their debate as his starting point.

## 8. The Jesus of History: D.F. Strauss

The main interpretive problem with Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu* (1835; final ed. 1840) arises from its axiomatic link to Hegelian idealism, which caused it to be hastily pigeonholed as part of the debate between Right and Left Hegelians. The first person responsible for such a state of things was Strauss himself, who actually inspired the successful label of Right and Left Hegelians according to the position the Hegelian disciples assumed on the Christological problem:[86] by taking sides with the Left he easily obtained recognition, but at the heavy price of a partial or total misunderstanding of his real ideas and purposes. Another related obstacle is that Strauss did not acknowledge his debt to Schleiermacher, who had been his most influential teacher when he went to Berlin in 1831–32.[87]

As a result, many interpreters did not realize that Strauss's *Life of Jesus,* the founding text of all following critical research about Jesus, is based on a spirit of historical inquiry essentially foreign to Hegelian historicism and closer to the spirit of Schleiermacher. Hegel was useful to Strauss mainly for a final philosophical justification for his religious doubts, but not for his investigative method.[88] The author of *Das Leben Jesu* remained a theologian and exegete, which is not to belittle the importance of his philosophical interests but to reveal the real motivation behind them, namely to reach a theological understanding of Jesus that could draw on history for support and did not need to be defended against it as was finally the case with Schleiermacher and his Johannine stronghold. Even the philosophers Strauss found important on religious topics serve as an index of how far he was from Hegel; in particular his inquiry owed much more to the Kantian definition of phenomenal knowledge than to Hegel's idea of historical totality, while the inspiration for his implacable exegesis came from Spinoza's *Tractatus theologico-politicus.*

Such an exegetic model was obviously dangerous to mention, and it meaningfully appears at the end of the *Life of Jesus,* in a glimpse of the transition from Spinoza to Kant, albeit interpreted in terms of the reasserted rift between the Jesus of history and the Jesus of faith[89] (*Der Christus des Glaubens und der Christus der Geschichte,* to quote the title of a critical essay on Schleiermacher written in 1865, just after the posthumous publication of his Berlin lectures titled, with a probable polemical overtone, *Das Leben Jesu*).[90]

These references are very clear but not enough in themselves. Strauss was too deeply absorbed in the struggle between the *Christus des Glaubens* and the *Christus der Geschichte* to recognize that Spinoza and Kant had made their greatest contribution to the question by outlining the inner paradox, defining the line of tension that always brings the two aspects of Christ's mediation together again just when they appear mutually exclusive. At this point Hegel's idealism revealed itself as a useful but equally ambivalent ally by formulating the reconciliation of finite and infinite as the maximum historical and speculative realization of the Absolute, as the utmost rational comprehension coincident with its historical realizations as a whole and with full awareness of their fulfilment in humankind. Strauss was fascinated by this ability, or aim, of reconciling the opposites historically and theoretically, even if the supposed synthesis had little to offer in the tortuous task of reconstructing how it was possible for it to be incarnated and revealed to humanity in a specific historical figure. At this point, the usual Hegelian interpretation presents mythology as the fittest field in which Strauss could find such a reconciliation in Christ, utterly unaware that Hegel's resonant formulas were not so relevant for this purpose. We will take a brief look at these two aspects, first the mythical aspect, to be evaluated leaving aside the Hegelian cliché, and then the speculative and more Hegelian.

First of all, Strauss frankly recognizes that myth is a massive obstacle for any modern reader or scholar interested in rationally interpreting the scriptures:

> Our modern world, . . . after many centuries of tedious research, has attained a conviction, that all things are linked together by a chain of causes and effects, which suffers no interruption. . . . From this point of view, at which nature and history appear as a compact tissue of finite

> causes and effects, it was impossible to regard the narratives of the Bible, in which this tissue is broken by innumerable instances of divine interference, as historical.[91]

Such a remark has nothing to do with Hegel, and the suggested solution is altogether different from the Hegelian one, when Strauss observes that myth potentially contains the right hermeneutics once we understand its real nature as collective elaboration and manage to distinguish its original forms from the more fantastic versions:

> It is not however easy to draw a line of distinction between intentional and unintentional fiction. In the case where a fact lay at the foundation, which, being the subject of popular conversation and admiration, in the course of time formed itself into a myth, we readily dismiss all notion of willful fraud, at least in its origin. For a myth is not the work of one man, but of a whole body of men, and of succeeding generations; the narrative passing from mouth to mouth, and like a snowball growing by the involuntary addition of one exaggerating feature from this, and another from that narrator. In time, however, these legends are sure to fall into the way of some gifted minds, which will be stimulated by them to exercise of their own poetical, religious, or didactic powers.[92]

Strauss goes beyond the rationalistic explanations of myth as mere forgery or subjective projection and considers it as an interpretive process in itself, to be understood in its main intention and freed from fantastic accretion and superfetation that go too far beyond its original nucleus of experience. There is no dialectical reasoning, but rather a realistic and historiographical way of dealing with precise documental and exegetic questions. The mythical solution proved a valid means to extricate Strauss's highly detailed analyses from the impasse they constantly met in the face of the opposing theses of supernaturalists (who held firmly to the datum of revelation) and naturalists (those scholars who would clutch at straws in their search for rationalistic explanations); the outcome in both cases proved to be a defeat for hermeneutics since, in spite of their opposite interpretations, they were alike in being fixed on the dead letter of the text. Unquestionably myth was effective as a third way capable of giving a fresh impulse to the work of exegesis. Was it

however, as effective in reaching the final goal of a deeper comprehension of the New Testament and its human/divine protagonist? The drawback of Strauss's method is that it starts from the "compact tissue of finite causes and effects" of history and science without further questioning. The interpretive task is thus already decided beforehand, and Strauss's inquiry tends to oscillate between erudite skepticism and an idle narrative journey through collective mythopoeia. From a scientific point of view, the results of applying the mythical method are therefore effective since the interpretation outlines the area to which the overall significance of the gospel texts can be traced back, but remains generic and confusing, finally putting into the shade the historical content and the aims that essentially characterize the Gospels, albeit in terms of the sacred history of salvation. In this way, though he had set out the problem of the historical Jesus with perceptive observations, an adequate solution eluded Strauss, since he did not perceive the theological and narrative plans of the individual evangelists from which the more probably historical fragments could be picked out so as to reconstruct Jesus's original ideas. To get clear from this methodological fog Strauss needed Hegel and his *Phänomenologie des Geistes*.

He was bound to look on Hegel as guaranteeing a safe passage to the shores of history, the more so—we may add—since Hegel's imposing synthesis of history developed from the post-Kantian *Life of Jesus* he wrote as a young man. The problem with Hegel is that he indicates the solution at once, brushing aside complications systematically and leaving them to the analytical labor of the intellect (*Verstand*); the solution is thus already assumed to be guaranteed and consolidated, with no regard for the true substance and uncertainty of the drama that is the spice of history, and the incalculable sum that is at stake. The fatal consequence of the Hegelian system is that its historicism takes effect at the expense of history and fails to explain it, lacking a viable notion of cultural genesis, and even fails to unfold history,[93] which ought to be its particular merit to do; instead the unfolding process inexorably disappears because everything in the overall organization is traced back to a development decided beforehand, and entirely contained in the Idea understood as God before creation in the *Wissenschaft der Logik*. The basic scheme remains tortuously theological, proving an easy target for criticism by the young Karl Marx,[94] and in the final analysis this surreptitious theology served no purpose since it again succeeded to pose the enigma involved in

interpreting the figure of Christ but offered no help in approaching it, let alone solving it.

The following lines come from the conclusion of Strauss's *Life of Jesus* in its last edition, and further emphasize how little his spirit of research has in common with Hegel's philosophy:

> Though I may conceive that the divine spirit in a state of renunciation and abasement becomes the human, and that the human nature in its return into and above itself becomes the divine; this does not help me to conceive more easily, how the divine and human natures can have constituted the distinct and yet united portions of a historical person [*geschichtlichen Person*]. Though I may see the human spirit [*den Geist der Menschheit*] in its unity with the divine, in the course of the world's history [*Weltgeschichte*], more and more completely establish itself as the power which subdues nature; this is quite another thing, than to conceive [*vorstellen*] a single man endowed with such power, for individual, voluntary acts. Lastly, from the truth, that the suppression of the natural existence is the resurrection of the spirit, can never be deduced the bodily resurrection of an individual.[95]

More than the writer's unsuccessful quest for faith, what meets with failure here is the underlying aim of Hegelian historicism, tied down to the logical and existential impossibility of deducing the incarnation of the infinite in the finite. At the same time, the honesty of these words, far from discouraging further research, clearly calls for it, and neither the significance nor the historical value of the central doctrine of Christology is destroyed by it; on the contrary it hiddenly restores that dogma in all its paradox and its evasion of any pan-logistic or consolatory synthesis. This places Strauss beyond the demystifying aims of a Reimarus, and runs counter to the simplified and too Hegelian interpretation of Schweitzer, who ignores what is truly ascendant in Strauss's endeavor.

Strauss succeeded in developing the main terms of the problem of the historical Jesus, and in some cases his results remain unsurpassed, but he was forced to oscillate between the *crux desperationis* of its unattainable center and the most advanced rationalizations of the culture of the period, Hegel being superseded at a certain point by a scientific positivism that

was already lurking since the beginning. Finally, Strauss turns out to have something in common with the Left Hegelians he too hasty sided with; not in his premises, which are different, nor in his method, but in a theological failure that outstrips Hegel and becomes adaptable to any post-Hegelian solution, including ultimately solutions completely alien to Hegel's philosophy. Only in this indirect and almost ironic sense did Strauss's exegesis pave the way for a real disciple of Hegel such as Ludwig Feuerbach who soon afterward interpreted Christianity as the maximum expression of a necessary, revelatory alienation of humanity, projecting itself and learning to know itself in God.[96] For Feuerbach, in *The Essence of Christianity* (1841), the Christian religion began to invert this process because the Son of God is humanized through his incarnation, thus delineating the final coming-true of the Hegelian Absolute in the pure and simple immanence of humankind. The Left Hegelians did no more than make explicit the neutralizing immanence characteristic of the Hegelian system and its dialectic, which crushed all independent objectual meaning, a position that was to be given revolutionary expression in Marx's historical materialism. It is easy to show how Strauss had no part in such solutions, and never would have since the place he held, as a defeated theologian and resigned exegete, was hardly coveted. But this very defeat presented him with an unexpected advantage: it enabled him to preserve the historical and objectual value of the texts he was anatomizing. His immediate successors, however, lost their way in the dense forest of philological and textual questions and were unable to recover that value, although they heralded fundamental acquisitions in knowledge that remained outside Strauss's ambit, such as the synoptic problem and the textual precedence of Mark's Gospel.[97]

Two different lines of research developed from these incomplete premises. The first emerged with Ernest Renan's *Life of Jesus* and the interpretations of Lutheran liberal theology and led to a moral rationalization of Jesus who is understood as a spiritual mediator accessible in this world, and ultimately bourgeois.[98] Another line that evolved entirely within the sphere of German culture was inspired by the discovery of the priority of Mark and the development of a more historical definition of myth than Strauss's. A third tendency of key importance stemmed from Johannes Weiss's researches at the end of the nineteenth century,[99] and centered on restoring Jesus as an eschatological prophet entirely oriented toward the futuristic and imminent

fulfillment of the Kingdom of God. This last image is the most fruitful from the point of view of writing history and is clearly reflected in Schweitzer's synthesis, but it still has active within it Reimarus's aim to demolish the metaphysical and theological image of Christ by radically demystifying it; consequently, the balance Strauss sought in terms of the history of religions appeared increasingly compromised, and the efforts of the Marcan school to identify a historical-critical concept of myth were not really developed. The outcome of this chain of exegesis was that the category of myth Strauss had turned to as a *medium quid* between faith and science once more fell under the blows of rational criticism, increasing the need to finally obtain a fully rounded image of the historical Jesus, freed of the mythical and eschatological interpretations that may have conditioned Jesus himself. Which brings us to Rudolf Bultmann and his theological program of demythologization (*Entmythologisierung*), a subject to which we have to devote some attention because of Bultmann's influence on the exegesis and theology of the last century.[100]

## 9. The Jesus of Faith: Bultmann

There is a radical change in the cultural climate when we come to Bultmann, although he refers to Weiss as a direct forerunner of his research.[101] In the mediatory vacuum after the First World War, a more advanced German philosophy performed a more radical and profound function than it did in Strauss's time, since, in the age of the triumph of technology, it recognized the failure of the Hegelian program and of the attempts to restore Kantian criticism in scientific form with neo-Kantianism. Consequently, while philosophy in Strauss was like a lifeboat that came to the rescue but left the ship of theology adrift and sinking, in Bultmann it acted in a criteriological manner from the very start, because it had a constructive part to play, supplying the planning skills and marine coordinates to save the theological ship of Christianity.

Bultmann draws openly on Martin Heidegger's philosophy and on his program to recover the "question of Being" (*Seinsfrage*), and the original ontological experience of Greek philosophy, starting from the existential analytics of the entity that is able to ask itself the question of Being and

think of the ontological difference between Being and entity,[102] namely the Being-There (*Dasein*), the human being as an entity that opens to Being in the finitude of its own There (*Da*). Heidegger counters the inauthentic experience of the "Anyone" or the "'They'" (*das Man*)—that is, the generalizing, accommodating impersonality that removes human experience from its essential finiteness—with the authentic experience of anguish (*Angst*), in which the *Dasein,* in itself temporal possibility constantly intent on the existential "futural" (*zukünftig*) planning of "Care" (*Sorge*), comes face to face with its most extreme possibility that ends in impossibility, death;[103] but it is in this being-toward-death that the Being-There confronts the ontological difference between Being and entity and has access to the existential authenticity that sets the three temporalizing ecstasies of past, present, and future in in-coming temporality that is experienced right through as possibility, plan, and Care.[104] The *Dasein* thus makes the decision (*Entscheidung*) to be itself, though there is no permanent solution, no escape from the depersonalizing inauthenticity of the Anyone, into which the *Dasein* can fall back and does so at every moment, but rather the complete configuration of its condition as existential possibility that is reflected in the openness of thinking, in seeking the sense of Being.

The existential analytics of *Being and Time* were taken up by Bultmann and translated into strictly theological terms, and resulted in one of the last century's most stimulating and original theologies.[105] The place of Heidegger's Being is taken by the God who gave himself to humanity through the experience of anguish and abandonment, the Christian God revealed in the Son's mission, death, and resurrection. In Bultmann, Heidegger's originary temporality, ecstatically open to the future as a coherent sense of having been and of being present, emerges as eschatological temporality, appearing in the form of a tensional present coming from a past of submission to sorrow and evil, and projected toward an impending redemptive future in Jesus's proclamation of the Kingdom of God. The announced Kingdom means "salvation for man, and more precisely the eschatological salvation that puts an end to all terrestrial reality [*allem irdischen Wesen*]," and is therefore "a Power [*eine Macht*] that wholly determines the present, though it is totally future [*ganz Zukunft*]," so that the temporal and existential correlative of its proclamation is the "decision time" (*Entscheidungszeit*) of his listeners.[106] As the author writes in his *Theology of the New Testament:*

> Now is the *time of decision,* and Jesus' call is the *call of decision.* . . . Now is the last hour; now it can be only: either–or! Now the question is whether a man really desires God and His Reign or the world and its goods; and the decision must be drastically made.[107]

Revisited in existential terms, the Lutheran *theologia crucis* becomes the distressing experience of sin,[108] that is, of the individual's finiteness and inadequacy, from which only Christ's forgiveness can bring release, not in a permanent sense that removes uncertainty and responsibility once and for all, but as an opening toward transcendence, an opening impossible to calculate and for that very reason never a given. In that way faith becomes "free and complete openness to the future,"[109] and suffering and death are transformed into the unlooked-for salvation of God's love, not because they are the doloristic and sacramental arrangements made for it, as in unauthentic and objectivated Christianity, but because they put human beings in a condition to receive it, in the existential situation of being open to grace and in the authentic temporality of awaiting salvation. Jesus's salvation opens the Kingdom of God through forgiveness, and this is reflected in the temporality of faith, in the ever-renewed futurity of God's love.[110] The theology of Bultmann therefore brings profound changes to Heidegger's ontological framework, which was structurally incapable of identifying a source of mediation, though it saw the need for it. With theological cogency, Bultmann replaces that framework with a different perception of Christ's mediation, seeing its historicity (*Geschichtlichkeit*) and reality, existential and existentive, as the revelation of the historicity proper to humankind.

Nevertheless, both Heidegger and Bultmann share a common problem, already expressed by Hegel in regard to historicity, and that is the strictly anobjectual nature of the question of Being for Heidegger and of Christ's mediation for Bultmann. In the latter's interpretation, Christ is negation of the world and eternal end of the world: he is eschatology incarnate, if that can be said, and appears precisely in the separation that makes it possible for humanity to seek and adhere to him. Christian eschatology is a continual depriving of worldhood, which does not cancel out the world, however, since the Christian remains there to all effects, rejecting the path of flight from the world, and lives in the world, in tension with the future beyond the world; and that is precisely the authentic dimension of the personal here

and now that defines Bultmann's dialectic, his existential paradox of faith. And all is expressed with an existential insight superior to the theology of Barth, entirely absorbed as it is in the effort to make its vertical, Neoplatonic dialectic add up, whereas Bultmann's thinking never deviates from a penetrating analysis of human life and the textual concreteness of the word of Jesus as found in the New Testament, since that word is the one concrete sign of the distance/presence of his mediation, in which faith comes into being. Yet this does not overcome the essential lack of object: indeed it makes it more incisive and subtle.

Bultmann introduces into his New Testament hermeneutics a dissymmetry that is completely modern, and unknown in the preaching of Jesus as we shall try to reconstruct it. Certainly, the original announcement attributable to Jesus and necessarily modified through the first communities into the κήρυγμα, hinges on a detachment from the world that becomes judgment, but actually it is wholly intent on a definitive renewal of creation that has reference to concrete human experience and its total objectual fulfillment. Bultmann starts from the crucial point of Jesus's eschatological newness and acknowledges that in the *kerygma* "the future after death and beyond this world is a future of the totally new,"[111] holding the necessity of "translating" the New Testament eschatological imagery in order to make its inner existential truth accessible to modern men and women. This is the best-known aspect of his theological enterprise—demythologization—which sounds like the twentieth-century answer to Strauss's attempt to find the true myth of Christ, but now we must pay attention to Bultmann's denial of the human object in the very moment he tries by its means to save a traditional notion of faith.

Bultmann draws on the theologies of Paul and John as offering the most advanced thinking in the New Testament because they already demythologize the mythic eschatological expectations of early Christianity, particularly the fourth evangelist "who eliminates apocalyptic eschatology altogether."[112] However, Bultmann never admits that the fourth Gospel asserts quite forcibly that Jesus did detach himself from the world, though only to save the world. The Johannine Christ tells the Father before the Passion: "I have given them your *logos,* and the world has hated them, because they are not of the world, as I am not of the world" (17:14),[113] but this is said to fulfill his words to Nicodemus: "Indeed God did not send [*apesteilen*] his son into the world

to judge the world, but to save the world through him [*di'autou*]" (3:17). This withdrawal from the human desire for revenge and judgment *is* the Christian judgment—and Bultmann fully subscribes to this—but it is this judgment, unclassifiable in human terms, that saves the world and reconstitutes it, and here Bultmann's dialectic is silent.

The radical deprivation of worldhood of the Christic, Christological, and Christian mediation that we see in Bultmann can be traced back to Luther's mediatory breach and remains entirely within its bounds. We find the same breach in *Being and Time,* when Heidegger raises the question of the *Seinsfrage* in all its urgency and characterizes the "ontological region" of theology as posing a more originary need compared to the individual sciences:

> *Theology* looks for a more originary [*ursprünglicheren*] interpretation, already intrinsic and inalienable in the very meaning of faith [*Sinn des Glaubens*], of humanity's being toward God. It slowly begins again to understand *Luther*'s intuition [*Einsicht*] that its dogmatic-systematic component rests on a "foundation" ["*Fundament*"] that does not arise from a primary question of faith [*primär glaubenden Fragen*], and one whose conceptual system [*Begrifflichkeit*] is not only inadequate for the problematic of theology, but obscures and destroys it.[114]

Through Protestantism, Heidegger had moved away from his Catholic upbringing and what he would have called onto-theology—the metaphysical ontology heedless of the difference between Being and entity; nevertheless, his outline of a historical reconstruction is remarkably sketchy: the works of the Church Fathers and a thousand years of medieval thought are reduced to a distant theology by "a more originary interpretation" and are wiped out with a single stroke. It is not a question of reproaching Heidegger for the incompleteness of his reconstruction, but of noting how he takes the Lutheran mediatory breach as an acquired fact. Indeed he admits no other horizon for the historical reconstruction of "Christian thinking," an expression in itself unacceptable in his eyes since thinking, in order to think of Being, must be detached from all particular ontic conditioning and revelation. Here once more is the Kantian dichotomy but divorced and free from any faith whatsoever, replaced by the quest for an ontological noumenon

that remains unattainable, not even conceding its grace, which, in Heidegger's second period, will be relegated to the remote past of early Greek philosophy and the uncertain future of an era of Being yet to come. For his part Bultmann ingeniously restores the Lutheran divine mediation, revisiting it with his own existential historicity, at the cost, however, of eliminating every ontic object, and so not escaping Heidegger's objectual orphancy. All these modern thinkers forget that it is impossible to speak of mediation in the absence of object, except in a truncated and ambivalent way, and this mediatory voidance looms over Bultmann's project as a whole.

This has repercussions for the area of Bultmann's work that is most deeply involved with the tools utilized in modern exegesis. Bultmann is in critical continuity with German New Testament philology that already had a wealth of formidable results to its credit by the beginning of the twentieth century, above all else the framing of the synoptic problem.[115] And so we may understand why he tackles the problem from the modern angle of demythologization and why this keynote of his project was just as appropriate as it was finally doomed to failure.[116] To the contemporary reader the idea of *Entmythologisierung* sounds like a refreshing, liberating move, and it was in fact very well received, but it was also the most critical point as regards historicity, as well as the most disappointing, since Bultmann relies to an appreciable degree on an inadequate definition of myth flawed by categorizations and simplifications derived from the Enlightenment.

Bultmann acknowledges mythology has a legitimate religious purpose:

> Myths speak about gods and demons as powers on which man knows himself to be dependent, powers whose favors he needs, powers whose wrath he fears. Myths express the knowledge that man is not master of the world and of his life, that the world within which he lives is full of riddles and mysteries and that human life also is full of riddles and mysteries.[117]

Nevertheless, this necessary attempt to explain religiously the mystery of the world remains insufficient because it objectivates its divine/demonic entities, without managing to reach an authentic experience of transcendence:

> It may be said that myths give to the transcendent reality an imminent, this-worldly objectivity. Myths give worldly objectivity to that which is

> unworldly. (In German one would say: *Der Mythos objektiviert das Jenseitige zum Diesseitigen.*)[118]

Mythology thus receives partial recognition but is inadequate in much the same way that the false interpretations of the Christian message are inauthentic, and above all remains inaccessible to modern minds that cannot do without the scientific rationalism that originated with the Greeks. For Bultmann the objectivation of New Testament mythology follows two directions, the historical and the cosmological, which are dissymmetric and so make interpretation easier. The historical mythologizing follows an apocalyptic line that has the merit of conserving within it the nonmythical nucleus of the irruption of eschatological time. The cosmological mythologizing is often mixed with the apocalyptic, and Bultmann's demythologizing efforts are mostly concentrated there since it presents the greater degree of conditioning, transforming the gospel announcement into a vision of the world, an objectivated, thingly *Weltanschauung* that eventually prevailed in the Christian tradition.[119]

We would fully endorse Bultmann's aim to render the Christian message sufficiently legible, to rid it of a mythical objectivation that had ceased to be a means and had become a hindrance, since there is undeniably an underlying interpretive problem. However, his entire focus is restricted to the moment of cognitive decay in which the myth hardens and becomes opaque to itself; as a result, he does not consider the propulsive, founding moment of the myth and goes on to draw an abstract contrast between a deteriorated, and therefore inferior, myth and modern science, which he accredited with an objective value on the one hand no less inescapable than Kant's phenomena to be overcome on the other hand in a transcendent noumenon conceived in terms of Lutheran and existential faith:

> In faith I realize that the scientific world-view does not comprehend the whole reality of the world and of human life, but faith does not offer another general world-view which corrects science in its statements on its own level. Rather faith acknowledges that the world-view given by science is a necessary means for doing our work within the world. Indeed, I need to see the worldly events as linked by cause and effect not only as a scientific observer, but also in my daily living. In doing so there

> remains no room for God's working. This is the paradox of faith, that faith "nevertheless" understands as God's action here and now an event which is completely intelligible in the natural or historical connection of events.[120]

In this reasoning we do not perceive any meaningful change from the third Antimony drawn by Kant between phenomenal determinism and noumenal freedom in the *Critique of Pure Reason,* and Bultmann clearly does not take into account the progress marked by Edmund Husserl's phenomenon, which as pure manifestation overcomes the Kantian distinction, with the result that we are still prisoners of Strauss's scientific "chain of causes and effects," except that we are looking at it from a worldless faith that is actually no less anobjectual than Strauss's lack of faith. And, needless to say, it becomes impossible to realize how the very notion of "object" (i.e. the world and man himself) was born, which transformed human beings in objectifying creatures. It is not a question of replacing Bultmann's insufficient idea of myth, in some respects even inferior to Strauss's, with an alternative, more organic conception, the case for which has already been argued. In a thinker of his caliber the major concern must be to identify the theoretical reasons for accepting a schematic view of mythology, and those reasons must be traced back—and the same has to be said for Heidegger—to the negative, unrecognized status of the object, finally of the phenomenon itself. In Bultmann there is no intramundane objectuality, and without an object recognized worldlily, the object in itself cannot have a meaning, let alone a historical genesis. The conclusion, then, is that there is historicity in Bultmann's thinking, and therefore progress in respect to the philosophical Jesus of Spinoza and Kant and the mythical Jesus of Strauss, but there is no historical object, nor any real autonomy for history.

This theoretical shortfall, at its most gloriously ontological in Heidegger, has in fact some basis in the New Testament texts that Bultmann always tries to adhere to. In those texts too, it seems fair to say, there is historicity but no autonomy for history; for their writers, as for Jesus himself, it is always the history of creation and the Creator's project for salvation, not the event-based written history we think of. In that respect Bultmann can be said to set up a felicitous short-circuit between modern objectual and mediatory privation and the absolutization of all mediation in God and his Son achieved by

New Testament thinking, especially by its foremost thinkers, Paul and John. The very success of his hermeneutics, though partial, prevented Bultmann from realizing that the historical object is always present in the New Testament and is above all its supremely objectual mediator who is God, and consequently humankind, created and saved through his action. Put in more theological-philosophical language, God transcends the world but does not deprive it of its worldhood because he created it and makes it anew, which means that Christian historicity potentially contains the moment of history's autonomy that in fact gained its freedom, on a directly historical level as well as a cognitive level, in the future development of Christianity, though for that development to come about it needed the very special set of conditions it met with in the West.

The powerful insight and the limitations of Bultmann's work are well evidenced in his book on Jesus published in 1926, which makes a fundamental contribution to the quest for the historical Jesus; but with its distinction between the unknowable Jesus's life and personality and his "'doctrine' ['*Lehre*'], his preaching,"[121] to be understood, moreover, only as the *kerygma* of the first communities, it fails to identify in its reconstruction a historically and conceptually balanced center of gravity, so that Kant's Christological paradox is replaced by stricter documental exclusion, by one-sided scientific argument albeit being more aware at the same time of the historical difficulties it had to overcome. Bultmann's demythologized Jesus becomes the incarnation of an existential appeal stripped of its context and transformed into a worldless Jesus of faith poles apart from the Jesus of history. The result is that the paradox of Christology is replaced by an insuperable dichotomy, a division restating in modern terms the ancient problem of the *communicatio idiomatum,* the communication that, in conciliar Christology, was intended to ensure the same characteristics were attributed to both Christ's human and his divine nature, and so guarantee the unity of his person.

The mediatory requirement is met, and in its way emphasized, but at the cost of essentially depriving it of any intermedial contact, let alone any objectual dimension, coming to converge, on the exegetical front, with the vertical absolutization of Barth's theology, which nevertheless rejects Bultmann's demythologizing because it is too anthropological, whereas it ought to be objected that it is not anthropological enough. In these twentieth-century developments of the Lutheran break with the traditional Christian

mediations, the Jesus-object is elusive all the same, whether taken from above or below, and the essential requirement of mediation vanishes, which is precisely to mediate toward something that is humanly recognizable. And that may be the reason why the astute Heidegger preferred prudently not to take a position on Bultmann's project, keeping an independent area for reflection about Being, unconnected to a divine mediation that was unable to really mediate and that, from his point of view, was doomed to remain fatally ontic. The same difficulties recur again and again in this excursus between philosophy and theology, and go back to the liberating, emptying deficiencies of modernity; and this justifies the ideas just examined, at the same time that it establishes their inflexible limits. Though they give different meanings to the term, both Barth and Bultmann refer to dialectic theology, and it is not so far from the purely conceptual negation of Hegel's dialectic, in view of the essential objectual negation of their Christian depriving of worldhood.

The legitimate reaction of Ernst Käsemann, a pupil of Bultmann, to the excesses of his historical negationism have blurred but not modified these fundamental aporias,[122] leading to a period of high-level exegetic and historical research in Germany always shackled by a historical actuality/reality incapable of really connecting with the Christic mediation that it wanted to reach. As a result, the distinctions drawn between a Jesus who is always to some extent deprived of worldhood and his Judaic environment are too abstract, which is typical of these researches. Catholic exegesis reacted to this impasse by attempting to draw on a theological heritage that appeared to be better balanced and more complete but really lacked an adequate historical vision, or rather lacked adequate reflection on the relationship between Christic and Christian mediation on the one hand and historicity on the other, the fatal outcome of which was to continue with an erudite and documental diffusion of exegesis of the Protestant type. It could be said that while Bultmann's theology developed a Christian historicity without history, Catholic exegesis was content with a history assumed in one way or another to be already given and remained incapable of gaining access to historicity. Catholic scholars therefore find themselves saddled with a history that keeps its object, its *objects*, but ultimately lacks the central wellspring of mediation that would alone be able to generate and sustain them. Representative of this tendency at its clearest is Meier's monumental study of Jesus, conditioned by

the mediatory and objectual weakness that the Protestant camp was the first to point out and interpret, and thus bound to suffer from an objectivity that is only objectual in parts, lacking at heart as it does the historical drive given by Christology.

This overview provides an outline, by continuation and contrast, of an alternative historical method that I shall now present, beginning with a most general theoretical definition of it in the next section and then following with an application of it that aims to underline its closeness to and its autonomy in managing the texts being studied.

## 10. A Phenomenological-Historical Approach

Separating the Jesus of faith from the Jesus of history has served an important twofold purpose: on the one hand, it has made it possible to develop theological reflection in a modern manner so that it can be compared with the results produced by the more advanced contemporary thinking; on the other hand, it has defined an area in which its own historical research can be pursued safe from fideistic and ideological interference. Käsemann's reaction was itself made possible by the course adopted by Bultmann previously, essentially *epoche* in respect to the many convenient images of an all-purpose savior coming out from liberal theology. This suspended judgment has made the Christ phenomenon more observable, but at the cost of making him appear to some extent an abstract and truncated figure that, by virtue of the method chosen, must inevitably remain the result of intensive and drastic selection.

Things become clearer if we examine more closely the misunderstanding generated between Bultmann and Käsemann.[123] Bultmann's suspension of judgment on the Jesus of history was not meant to be a simple suspension since, with his ability to take up and interpret the mediatory and existential suspension of human beings in the twentieth century, he intended to stake out a definitive theological area through dialectical and eschatological tension. Yet that very tension, once defined, could only make plain that it fed on an eschatological mediation of the Christ that historically existed and drew its theological legitimacy from that, going back to the Kantian paradoxical exclusion/implication of noumenal Jesus and phenomenal Jesus, where

nevertheless his historical figure remains a documental noumenon substantially denied in its specific import and therefore incapable of relaunching the paradox. Although Bultmann's identification of the island of the kerygmatic, existential Jesus always showed itself as text-based and therefore historical, and contained the seeds to revive the historical debate, it never led to a more harmonious reorganization because it was oblivious to its own assumptions. Käsemann explicitly reintroduced the idea of the Jesus of faith as inseparable from the Jesus of history but failed to clarify the overall problem in mediatory and objectual premises, so that he obtained as a result, and at a higher theological and documental level, the completely Christian Jesus of the old liberal theology, only a little less bourgeois and featuring a more twentieth-century, existential touch. A likelier Jesus, but not necessarily more authentic, since it leaves an ample margin for the debate to fragment and lose direction, until it finally becomes entrenched behind the denominational or ideological rereading of his figure that has typified research on the subject in recent decades.

Meier's impressive investigations have produced a mass of scattered fragments, incisive in many details but lifeless as a whole, and is something characteristic of current scholarship at its best which, with its wealth of single points and hermeneutic poverty overall, attempts to react to the more ideological and fashionable tendencies of the so-called Third Quest for Jesus (in its turn a popular and questionable label that has been found for justifying the Jesus Seminar and the work of its scholars).[124] But, in doing so, it acts on similar documental assumptions as the Third Quest, and those assumptions are not even definable as positivistic since, of the old positivism of the age of James George Frazer, Émile Durkheim, and Sigmund Freud, the present "postmodern" wave—or whatever sham name you care to call it—is without the ontological sense of the historical fact, of the *factum,* and has lost its way in a pseudo-Nietzschean or genuinely analytic perspectivism that destroys the very notion of history, often cheerfully brought down to a Western or linguistic prejudice. To overcome this impasse, we need to recoup the philosophical and theoretical terms presented in the introduction to this work and reexamined here *sub specie theologica.*

I will run through the essential elements of my proposed method and interpretation. My thesis is simply that we must start, in my phenomenological-historical way, from the Christ phenomenon, above all as we find it at a

textual and theological level in the documents that have survived, without taking it to be a definitive manifestation as a matter of principle, as Husserl does, but rather as the result of a cultural, historical, and textual process that has still to be discovered and defined in all its parts, and opens out as an independent field of investigation precisely by being understood in its religious significance. The Christ phenomenon is not, therefore, one indivisible whole, which would be to repropose a monad of a theological, moral, existential, or other type, as in Schleiermacher's and Bultmann's attempts to define and defend their *Christus des Glaubens;* instead it is a complex but not heterogeneous whole that can be broken down into its various strata, as long as the process does not stop at the *pars destruens* stage and the overall image resulting from it is always borne in mind, since it provides the background to the work of interpretation. And so we can recognize that the Christ of tradition also potentially contains the Christ of history, with significant traces of the historical Jesus absorbed and developed in subsequent strata, awaiting only the criteria needed to isolate and reassemble them to form an image that is clearer and more historicized for us.

It is therefore possible to reach the figure of Christ by starting from a context reconstructed in historical and theoretical terms, provided a place, and not a minor one, is given to the images his followers made of him, and assuming the context can transmit original data, which remains to be verified. In other words, the Christ phenomenon can be made visible through a dense web of information, variously interconnected and related from the start, gradually yielding clues and motifs related to the corresponding historical reality of his figure, ideas, and actions. It is interesting to make a comparison with D.F. Strauss's concept of *Christophanie* or *Erscheinungen Jesu,*[125] and finally a direct *Christuserscheinung,*[126] which still has for him the Kantian meaning of an appearance (*Erscheinung*) detached from the unknowable noumenon, while I would argue that we have to mean by phenomenon the potential totality of what is historically and objectually knowable of Christ. Even if this phenomenological-genetic method can provide no absolute certainties—no more than other more partial methods—it can, on the other hand, reach conclusions that are reliable in the present state of our knowledge and, furthermore, can bring into focus a consistent image having a heuristic value since it gives us a Christological, Christic, and Jesuan figure, moving backward through the strata that make up the Christ of Christianity, a figure

active in history at various depths, and with certain arguable possibilities of having something to do with the Jesus who really lived.

The idea that the Jesus of history is in principle inaccessible and must not prejudice the Jesus of faith is in this way substantially overcome. Other researchers such as Meier have taken that idea up in more nuanced, graded terms in an attempt to carve out a territory for their own investigations free from fideistic and ideological interference, and his huge work *A Marginal Jew* in several volumes is undoubtedly a reference point for future research and the proof that American scholarship now dominates the field over which, until a few decades ago, Germany reigned. The best of these scientific inquiries have the merit of making the Christ phenomenon more easily observed, but the price paid for doing so is to create an abstract or amputated character destined, by virtue of the method chosen, to remain, like Bultmann's Jesus, the result of intensive and drastic selection, or else a rigid and intransitive chain of scattered fragments devoid of wider context and a legitimate sense of tradition, like Meier's, fatally bound to become his "halakic Jesus," that is, a rabbi entirely absorbed with the interpretation of the Mosaic Law.[127] This is a portrait far less fascinating than Bultmann's existential Jesus (which is not necessarily a scientific defect) but no less problematic (and this is a defect), given that, as Meier admits, "the use of the word *halaka* ('walking,' 'conduct,' 'behavior') to refer to a legal opinion or ruling concerning specific human conduct" is not attested prior to 70 AD. In his eyes this is not an obstacle, for "the rabbinic innovation in introducing it was purely semantic,"[128] yet in so doing Meier reaches a conclusion almost opposite to his previous exclusion of the later rabbinic writings as viable comparative sources for understanding the historical Jesus, with the result that he runs the risk of excluding Hebrew sources when they might be useful and including them when they might be misleading. Meier's proto- or quasi-rabbinic Jesus is completely prone to make comments on an already established Law, whereas a realistic picture is that of a first-century Judaism in search of an effective definition of a monotheistic mediation far from already being clarified let alone shared. The historical Jesus was fully part of this difficult process, to the point of being crucified because of his controversial position.

My thesis aims to be more comprehensive and elastic, without discarding the aspects of the historical Jesus less appealing to modern mentality, and posits that the several layers of the Christ phenomenon potentially contain

the historical Jesus as well, substantial traces being taken up and developed in successive strata and awaiting only the right criteria to isolate and recompose them into a clearer, more historicized image. As we have just seen in D.F. Strauss, the transition here is perfectly comparable to the change from phenomenon as Kant understood it, that is, as appearance (*Erscheinung*) showing what is accessible to our cognitive forms without telling us anything about the thing itself, the noumenon, to phenomenon as Husserl understood it, that is, not in opposition to noumenon since it contains the totality of knowledge and Being gradually manifested there, with the further difference that, in my mediatory or ecstatic-objectual theory, the phenomenon was not a manifestation to be assumed as already given naturalistically but was the result of a traumatic historical occurrence, repeated in time. This break allowed the biological sphere to begin to look at itself and at the world in the cultural drama of the ecstatic release from itself and the constitution of the object. The vantage point thus gained is able to overcome any attempt to dismiss the Christianity phenomenon by artificially separating it from the figure of Christ.

To counter such attempts in principle we need only repeat the extremely general, but not generic, argument that religious mediations are not a matter of improvisation and cannot be the result of simple illusory projections or, worse still, of bad faith. The emergence of Christianity is inconceivable without the initial impetus given by a great religious personality, leaving a legacy of teaching so unforgettable that many of his followers accepted martyrdom rather than deny it and serious thinking in the ancient world found a new direction in order to understand it. Myth, assisted by the propulsive thrust of sacrifice, is the cognitive tool for exploring these processes; it is a means capable of disclosing unexplored objectual frontiers, starting from transfigured and partial images, *imaginalis* representations that become new configurations for interpreting and focusing, innovative matrices shaping perception and knowledge. The presence of mythographic elements in Christianity and Judaism is not a rational indicator that they are false and inauthentic but, rather, a valid mark of their imaginal course through history, to be recognized and pursued, of course, to avoid lapsing into the bad mythography of an unacknowledged *mythos.* And history is a constitutive part of both the Christian and Judaic *mythos;* it is precisely the object that their mediation has made more recognizable, detaching it from the *kosmos*

that Greek rationalism, superior in many aspects, traced it to. It was indeed the unforeseeably productive interaction between Hellenic and Judaic culture that brought about the most outstanding achievements of the Old Testament investigations, and they are fully present in the ideas of Jesus and the first generations of Christians.

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There are very good reasons for restoring critical and historical credit to the idea, first and foremost, that Christianity is as it appears to be in the four Gospels chosen by the tradition as closest to the teachings of Jesus. Certainly, they are not to be interpreted today from the exclusivist perspective of a tradition at that time seeking to define and assert itself, but from an inclusive perspective; the progress of textual and cultural development that gave a different meaning to what came to it from the past can be reconstructed by looking at the Judaic texts, as can the meaning given to what reached out toward the future by looking at the writings that went to form the New Testament, without excluding other writings about Jesus that have to be understood in terms of their spiritual and cognitive aims, such as the Gnostic texts, subjected to two thousand years of discredit and condemnation, which no longer have any reason to exist. This does not mean putting all available sources on the same plane but rather seeing them in terms of their common ties, their differences, and reciprocal relations.

A rationally objectual approach to the sources will enable us, for example, to recognize significant testimonies where they have found their way into the so-called apocryphal gospels but also to establish, without appealing to apologetic or denominational principles, whether these texts present legendary or regressive interpretations of the figure of Jesus, or are a response to the preoccupations of proto-Gnostic sects. The *Gospel of Thomas,* for example, translates the message of Jesus into spiritual knowledge reserved for the chosen few to save them from the material world, a position that has little to do with the preaching of the historical Jesus. But this does not mean in the least that the Gnostic positions do not deserve our closest attention when it comes to piecing together as a whole the torn and ragged history of early Christianity, since they preserved certain Jesuan features in the role recognized for women, as Garbini maintains, and for other reasons that he overlooks, never imagining the heuristic fall-out that would come from his discoveries in the

field of Judaism. Indeed, in view of the savage archaic phase of the Yahwistic cult and of the terrible secret founder of the Second Temple, it seems clear that there was ample justification for Gnostic hostility toward the God of the Old Testament, classified as a demonic, ambiguous figure to be overcome through knowledge of the true spiritual God, whereas this was lost on the Christian apologists such as Irenaeus and Origen who reacted against the perceived danger of Gnosticism. The response of the Great Church was to prove most effective historically because it ignored the intra-Judaic conflicts that early Christianity and Gnosticism, with its partisan version of them, had attempted to overcome. The real strength of the Christian mediation, as the Great Church understood, did not lie in the puristic exclusivism associated in the second century with Marcion, who promulgated the first canon of the Bible text in which only the Pauline corpus and a reduced version of the Gospel of Luke were included; the real strength lay in an, at least potentially, inclusive reconstruction and recognition of the Judaic roots that continued to hold the secret and the driving force of Christ's mediation. It was also the more valid choice as is shown by the not insignificant observation that the Gnostic polemic, by contrast, simply continued the polemic within Middle Judaism, which could be evidenced by the existence of a Jewish gnosis influencing the cabbalistic tradition.[129]

We now have the elements we need to set about a wider, more organic vision of Christianity that we become capable of recovering in its forgotten components and minority variants; to progress beyond the formalistic abstractions of the literary-narrative approaches, the antiobjectual deconstructions of postmodern methods, and Garbini's postrationalist reductionism; and to recenter Christianity critically on its original source and inspiration, which is the teaching of Jesus set in the Middle-Judaic, Hellenistic, and Roman context to which it belongs. Christianity as a historical object exists, though not entirely in conformity with its image as imposed over the centuries, and it stems from the revolutionary mediation proposed by the rabbi of Nazareth to unify and bring into being the mediations that Israel sought for its salvation. His courageous stance in denouncing the degeneration into violence that disgraced the cult in Jerusalem brought the death sentence upon him and caused his followers, after their experience of his death and resurrection, to increasingly distance themselves from the other tendencies in Judaism until there came a final break after 70 AD.

There remain, however, some doubts to be cleared up regarding distorting and propagandist aspects that are always recognizable in the Christian texts. And more generally, doubt remains as to the exact historical tenor of narratives like the Gospels that, even in their finest testimonies, retain something of the method of the historians of antiquity that aimed at constructing ideal arguments and episodes; and there is a similar, difficult balance between sticking to a representational and cognitive project capable of continuing development, and drifting into a self-representational myth that might be useful for satisfying a variety of interests but offers infinitely fewer possibilities for objectual development. The difficulty I am endeavoring to explain is bound up with the type of objectual world a mediation has reference to; if that world is not concrete, any theoretical or historical characterization remains inevitably categorial, while there is an intermediate danger of falling into abstraction even after a successful reconstruction is thought to have done its work, when what matters instead is to identify and maintain a line of tension, a reference just as objectual to the historical object being studied. In other words, we have to further clarify and understand that the world of the New Testament is not only a historical world but at the same time a spiritual and intermediating *mundus imaginalis.*

In respect to the latter, the specific character of the method followed by the Gospel and New Testament writers to evoke the figure of Jesus is still not brilliantly clear in its experiential and objectual reality, and it is precisely that reality that must be the goal of an integrally phenomenological-historical approach. And considering that Jesus is the narratological and theological *figura* on which everything converges and from which everything originates, according to the figural view of history,[130] there is even more reason for this hermeneutic operation, still more indispensable when we recall not only our survey of the rationalistic and ideological incomprehension but also the misunderstandings that easily arise in any inquiry into the historical Jesus, while the quest for his *ipsissima verba* has to distinguish his words from the words attributed to him by the evangelists and by a tradition that was primarily liturgical. This amounts to asking ourselves what type of historicity the Christian experience refers to, a historicity interacting with our idea of historicity that is the outcome of interaction between Greco-Roman historiography and the theological and existential historiography of Judaism and Christianity, in which the Christian contribution was decisive, joining all

these contributions together in the absolute incarnate historicity that is Jesus Christ. But how was his image, or rather images, as presented in the earliest Christian texts first arrived at and developed? The question requires us to examine the mentality presiding over the creation of those texts and the Christian creed, and into the workshop that fashioned the many-sided and entire figure of the prophet from Nazareth as we know it.

## 11. Christological Ecstasy

Little or nothing of the Gospel accounts will be understood without bearing in mind that they spring from an extremely powerful originating experience of mediation with Christ. The theological commentaries are right when they state that the Gospels' supremely attentive attitude to everything Jesus said or did can be explained as starting from the disciples' experience of encountering Jesus after the Resurrection; not only male disciples but female as well. In John the latter are given precedence in meeting the risen Christ, confirming the special place women must have occupied in the original Christic experience, while the synoptic Gospels limit themselves to the angel's announcement being first made to the women at the tomb, an instance of precedence no less remarkable.

The hermeneutic fall-out of the experiential aspect of the encounter with Jesus after the Resurrection can be appreciated as long as we do not interpret it in an event-based, circumscribed sense as if it were an objective encounter that took place according to normal empirical rules or vice versa a subjective experience spilling over into collective hallucination. In fact, the textual evidence shows an event that is neither objective nor subjective but situated at the ecstatic and objectual source from which object and subject first take shape, which means that there is no object to be observed in this experience, and no subject observing it; instead there is a manifestation—a phenomenological Christophany—from which the object springs and the subject senses itself springing.[131] This suggests an irresistible inner creation from nothing that those who witnessed came to see as the final completion of God's creation by the Son of man, now consigned to his Christological role as the Son of God, as sole Mediator, all one with the Mediator by whom he claimed to be sent. The Epistle to the Hebrews is an excellent example of

this, with its theology of history starting from the creation of "eons," and the providential plan revealed through the various experiences of faith, reaching a culminating, summary experience in Christ. These phenomenological characteristics—they are to be taken as such since they manifest themselves independently of any assumptions made by the interpreter—lead to certain interlinked corollaries fundamental for understanding the real nature of the religion of the resurrected Christ and its textual sources that send us back to another Source, the source of the living water mentioned in John when Christ talks to the woman of Samaria.

The first corollary is that the experience of meeting the resurrected Christ occurred in precise spatial-temporal circumstances, but cannot be entirely reduced to those coordinates. It is thus repeatable, not because it is repeated but because it is always the same, after the manner of Christ's sacrifice as explained in Hebrews and, in later reflection, as quite rightly applied to the sacrament of the Eucharist, essentially developing what was already implicit in the epistle. This refers to a profound, paradoxical interpenetration of the suprasensible and sensible planes that makes it possible to attain a condition beyond space and time at the very heart of human historical experience, through the medium of a single, personal mediator who becomes universal. The ecstatic-objectual conditions of the original mediation are relived in a thoroughly personalized manner, making the individual the central pivot of the ecstatic event that creates the object and reverberates objectually on him and on the community in its appeal to the ultraindividual and universal mediator. What historical conditions, one wonders, made a religious experience of this kind possible? The answer, I think, lies in Middle Judaism's reappraisal of the spiritualism of Socrates and Plato that influenced religious life and the perception of the relationship to the God of Israel. And this is the second historical corollary to be borne in mind in our reconstruction.

The historical background to the Christian mediation lies in this combination of Socratic-Platonic spirituality, with its tension toward the superior reality of the intellect, and the Judaic experience of defeat as an occasion revealing God's authentic transcendence, the real meaning of his mediation, first experienced in this way by the prophets and then extended to the dissident minority in the priesthood after Zerubbabel's assassination.[132] Their coming together, with its far-reaching consequences, was facilitated by the

figure of the philosopher as the just man which Plato elaborated on the model of Socrates, the figure of the wise man who is persecuted as a witness to the truth he seeks and who acquiesces in the mistreatment of the world of human iniquity that surrounds him. There are, however, some specific differences between the experience of the Greek "just" (i.e., consistent with the ontological and ethical cipher of *dikaiosyne*) and the Judaic and Christian "holy" (i.e., of the believer justified and sanctified by God) that underscore the fact that this is really the same problem stated in two different formulations.

The philosophical martyrdom of Socrates, and of the Just Man with every appearance of injustice in book II of the *Republic,* remains an act of violent injustice and is not transformed into a saving mediation, which in Plato's philosophy is entirely entrusted for its realization to knowledge and political planning in the sphere of the *polis,* an advance beyond the politically impotent Socratic ideal of the just man. Among the Jews, however, the veritative, revelatory sense of defeat becomes fundamental and intransitive to a degree unknown in Greek culture where tragedy and philosophy present us with the two extremes of the charade, as it were, but never really manage to bring them together. This means that in Israel the suprasensible sphere, conceived as spiritual and in that sense extramundane, becomes sensible when the material, earthly sphere is overturned and shattered by the destruction of its intramundane ends; in the first place, this reversal entails punishment for mankind's blindness and arrogance, witnessed again and again in the Bible, but it becomes markedly powerful when what has been wiped out is the intramundane success of goals in themselves worthy of the God of Israel. The theological inspiration for the Songs of the Suffering Servant is to be found here, with their magnificent reinterpretation of the trauma of the assassination of Zerubbabel, providing a further confirmation for dating them to the Hellenistic period, when knowledge of the ideas of Socrates and Plato must have revolutionized Judaic theology relating to history and stimulated formidable interaction.[133] Beyond the actual intentions attributable to the anonymous authors of these far-reaching theological innovations, the logic of sacrifice itself was reassessed ethically and transformed into a revolutionary means of redemption. There is a real risk that even the worthiest end, from a religious viewpoint, will fail to be achieved on earth, rendering its supremely objectual origin and destination unrecognizable and so not circumscribable

to any one object taken in isolation as having value in itself. The sacrifice accepted by the mediator dear to God and sent by him allows us, then, to restore the right creational and objectual stream, to bring its originating into visibility and completion, and thus to accomplish the work of sanctification that everything seemed to deny.

This is the essential structure of the Christian experience, transformed through the incarnation of the divine mediator into a law of objectual transitivity that nothing and nobody can stop, since even when it pauses for a moment it picks up further momentum and gains definitive confirmation. This becomes the cipher of Christian access to the human object as such, with no miracles from outside, and this is yet another corollary alongside the other two. It is well known that Paul speaks of his own personal acquaintance with the resurrected Christ in the shape of an encounter that took place years after the Crucifixion coinciding with his conversion, though he stresses its continuity with the previous resurrectional encounters he describes in 1 Corinthians 15:3–7. It is not, then, a case of banally portentous happenings but of a type of ecstatic and objectual experience open to all Christians, in which all may personally participate. Developing Origen's view on the spiritual sense of scriptures,[134] we might speak of the resurrection of Christ and the resurrection of the spirit experienced by every believer as two moments forming finally a continuum and attesting to the power of the Christological mediation realized during Christ's life and for that very reason always active in the lives of those who believe in him. A further corollary follows from this, directly concerned this time with editorial and textual aspects.

Beginning with Paul, the first Christian authors when speaking and writing about Christ renew their experience of meeting him, which can be likened to and in the end identified with meeting the risen Christ, and there is every reason to attribute a similar aptitude to the evangelists. For the gospel writers, writing about Jesus and reproducing his words meant not only collecting material and sayings about him that had been passed down, but also taking possession of it or rather allowing themselves to be possessed by it, in a process of hermeneutic acquisition inseparable from the ecstatic-objectual dimension of his resurrection. To have Jesus utter words that do not correspond to the *logia* as transmitted or that result from combining different *logia* or are actually constructed ad hoc on the basis of certain exegetical and theological positions, might appear to be the same as the Greek or Roman

historian when he finds noble or memorable words, fitting the event he has chosen as exemplary, and puts them into his characters' mouths. But on closer inspection, the process followed by the evangelists is practically the opposite since in their case it is the protagonist Jesus who dictates the words framed by the writer, rendering him the faithful instrument for a divine purpose that he must fulfill because it must reach mankind, operating like the inspiration of the prophets of old and in accordance with the invisible progress of Christ's action, attributed by the Christian texts to the Holy Ghost or Paraclete, which was soon identified as the third person of the Trinity. In the *Sitz im Leben* of the Christian writers, the setting of their lives, there is therefore no distinction between editorial aspects that we might regard as distinct and actually conflicting, a fact that ought to bring scholars who strive to establish the *ipsissima verba Jesu* to pause and reflect, not because their efforts are misguided but because the distinction between words deemed authentic and the work of editors must not be overstated.

It is only on reaching this last, and first, level that the several aspects of the gospel, New Testament, and Christian layers come together in an overall organic vision, comprising a variety of directions but all stemming from the creative intensity of one initial experience. If we lose sight of this generating experience—and it calls for a phenomenological attitude open-minded in regard to history and cognition—the differences at once become inconsistencies, the doctrinal developments concealment, and the theological-narrative arguments falsification. The *mundus imaginalis* and *realis*—"figural," to put it in one word—offered us by the New Testament writers simply falls apart and disappears. It is not a question of laboring particular points or building up erudite evidence, always contestable anyway. Rather, we need to shift the angle of observation and let the phenomenon speak for itself, a phenomenon absolutely pertinent to our lives, considering that the critical and historical awareness we bring to it derives from its existential and cognitive retroactions, in which the objectual focus of the various civilizations involved is secretly merged.

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So now we can return to concentrate our comparative reflections on the Christian transition. Its content has still to be dealt with, and it goes without

saying that no real comparison would be feasible if any of its essential terms were substantially lacking. In this respect the fourth Gospel, far from being a mass of contradictory scribble as Garbini maintains, is without doubt a highly appropriate source, on account of both its theological maturity and the antiquity of some of the material transmitted. We owe the Gospel of John to an unknown theologian who declares he draws on the teachings transmitted by the enigmatic "disciple whom Jesus loved" (13:23 *et al.*), who must not be confused with the apostle of the same name, though the tradition ends up superimposing the one on the other. As I hinted earlier, this anonymous author has to be considered one of the major Christian thinkers of all time, something that I feel is insufficiently taken into account even among scholars who share or sympathize with his views. The cause lies in a centuries-old revelationist tendency among Catholics to underrate the original, anticonventional quality of the work and a converse tendency among Protestant commentators to underrate its subtle, mature theological balance.

The background to the fourth Gospel appears to share common features with the Epistle to the Hebrews, for example the creative reworking of notions coming from Greek philosophy, such as the *logos* dominating the prologue, and the use of a particularly incisive historical-figural method that we will need to investigate; nonetheless, the evangelist does not exhibit the sophisticated Hellenistic culture of the author of Hebrews. So it comes as no surprise that the Gospel of John contains a wealth of comparative elements, related to the need to progress beyond the internal difficulties of Middle Judaism and at the same time expressing the universal scope of Jesus's preaching. This is clearly shown by the miracle at the marriage in Cana, the episode that inaugurates Jesus's public mission in the Gospel's figural narration; together with another episode, the casting of the moneylenders out of the Temple, this passage will provide a means to approach Jesus's relationship to Judaism and the pagan cults. The interpretation I plan to make of these episodes will take us into the workshop where the New Testament's finest Christology was fashioned, and so to the vital nerve-centers of the Christian mediation.

2.

# The Marriage at Cana and the Temple Protest

## 1. The Underlying Procedure in John

In our long journey from classical antiquity to modernity, passing through ancient Greece and Christianity with the problem of the origins of mankind looming in the background, we cannot but apply a comparative method, today more necessary than ever because of the amplitude of our historical knowledge, and yet less feasible than ever, because of our loss of great cultural mediations capable of producing an objectual view of history as a whole. The only shared cultural mediation is the techno-scientific and economic worldview, but its main premise consists in undifferentiating all the available data, so that a real comparison among cultures becomes impossible and even a phenomenon like human culture is simply declared nonexistent. A worldview annihilating the cultural object is worldless and finally not a view at all. Friedrich Nietzsche and Thomas Mann would say that the triumphant *Zivilisation* is destroying *Kultur,* but even this is a partial, polarized way of dealing with the present tendency, since it finally amounts to destroying both (and here only the self-destroying Nietzsche has a role to play). Moreover, hyperspecialization is the direct consequence of this undifferentiating and anobjectual process, and it has been particularly detrimental to the exegetic

and theological study of strongly "comparastic" religions such as Judaism and Christianity, whose self-understanding relies so heavily upon their resistance to others, not to mention the question of the historical Jesus.

Thus the interpretive situation is discomforting, and even more so if we take into account the fight of Judaism against the surrounding religions and cultures, the clash among the several wings inside the Middle-Judaic world, and the final hardened conflict between Judaism and Christianity, besides the different Christian communities and churches, where each party had an interest in denying the religious and moral legitimacy of its opponents. Nevertheless, I have shown in the Intermezzo that both Judaism and Christianity managed to define themselves through a twofold process of absorption and contrast, where the first caused the rise of the second, but the latter was often the way to fulfill the former. This means that, in spite of all, the comparatist aspects are part of the heritage of Judaic and Christian beliefs and ideas not only passively but also in an active process of adaptation and interpretation, of course to be ascertained in each single case.

In this regard the fourth Gospel provides indispensable elements for reflection on two counts: the profound nature of its theological development, *pace* Garbini, and the antiquity of some of its traditional data. John is the most mysterious object of the whole New Testament, for the uniqueness of its tradition, its original presentation of Jesus's figure and teaching, and lastly the mystery of its author, who goes back by an apostolic (though the term is never used) succession different from the synoptic one and has a cultural position of his own. The author of our text is probably a follower of the enigmatic Beloved Disciple, who is presented by the Gospel as its main authority and probably the understood founder of his community, as the three epistles attributed to John, but by another hand, make clear.[1] The evangelist's name was identified in the late second century with John son of Zebedee, and this appears a clear example of pseudepigraphy, so that his real identity remains unknown. He is one of the greatest Christian (and not only Christian) thinkers of all time, but the available sources on him are extremely meager, apart from the usual hagiographic stories which constitute almost automatically a loss of information, not a gain, for modern readers. But the features of his culture are particularly striking, whoever he was: on the one side, he appears to be much more closely acquainted with the Palestine and Jerusalem of Jesus's time than the synoptic writers; on the other, he exhibits

a good Hellenistic culture, as demonstrated by his Greek, simple in its grammar but perfectly mastered and transformed in its expressive means for an outstanding thought. This Hellenic touch becomes even stronger if we consider, as we shall do, his possible knowledge and use of Greek philosophy.

The suggested conclusion is that if there is one writing in the New Testament capable of giving us information on the presence of a comparatist reflection in the early Christian tradition, it is probably the fourth Gospel. And, if we look for more precise confirmation, we are not disappointed. The episode of the marriage at Cana, which is only found in John and inaugurates the public mission of Jesus, goes to the heart of the matter and presents us with a real comparative palimpsest set strategically within the overall structure of the work. The miracle performed at the Cana wedding contains critical allusions to the difficult relationship of the Johannine community with Judaism, but mixes them with motives coming from the Eastern Mediterranean and, indirectly, from classical Greece.

The pertinence of this pericope to our theme lies in the circumstance that when Jesus changes water into wine he performs a typically Dionysian miracle: a sudden and radical change of state in a ritual metamorphosis; added to this, the wonder is performed by a divine mediator acting incognito, which is a recurrent detail in Dionysian theophanies, as is seen to spectacular effect in Euripides's *Bacchae*. There is no lack of contextual confirmation for the Dionysian nature of the event, and it all helps to build up a fragmented yet recognizable picture. Epiphany, January 6, was the day fixed for the liturgical reading of the episode, which corresponds to an ancient Dionysian feast: the day on which Athens celebrated the Lenaia, the feast of the winepress commemorating the final birth of Dionysus, after his premature birth evoked at Eleusis. And it is notable how Origen, after the semantic resonance of "I am the true vine" in John 15:1, has no qualms about using the Dionysian image of the winepress when he illustrates the pressing out of the Eucharistic wine of the Passion in his homilies on Matthew.[2] And it is not insignificant that the Lenaia took place in the month of Gamelion, the eponymous month of the *hieros gamos,* the sacred marriage that can be connected symbolically to the marriage in Cana. This overlapping is more than just an "interesting coincidence" as Raymond Edward Brown puts it. One of the most important scholars of John in the second half of the twentieth century, Brown has strong reservations about the existence of intentional parallels between the text of

John and pagan rites.[3] On the contrary, the feast of the Lenaia is no isolated case but has a place in traditions common to the Mediterranean world as a whole that are far from extraneous to the original Yahwistic cult. At about this same date, on the Greek island of Andros, a Dionysian miracle of a water spring being changed into a spring of wine was celebrated; and according to the Christian writer Epiphanius, Dusares, the Dionysus of the Nabateans who had features similar to Yahweh in ancient times, was celebrated on the day of Epiphany, apparently a feast day in ancient Egypt as well.[4] Epiphanius also writes of a fountain flowing with wine on that day in pagan Gerasa, one of the cities of the Decapolis, where Jesus exorcizes a devil in Mark and Luke.[5]

Some of these parallels were pointed out by Bultmann in his day, and he rightly speaks of the *Wunder der Epiphanie,*[6] but his syncretistic view of the connection between the Judaic and Hellenistic elements in Christianity heavily affects his evaluation, quite apart from his schematic idea of demythologization. On the other hand, quite a few scholars, such as Brown, are adamant in denying any connection, not on the basis of any real historical and scientific evaluation but because they declare it extraneous a priori.[7] The recognizable argument behind his position is Charles Harold Dodd's, according to which the Dionysian analogies are generic "folk-tale motives" not specifically classifiable on a religious basis, with the further assertion that they seem "contrary to the whole ethos of the primitive preaching and gospel writing":[8] the latter remark is undoubtedly true, but it does not mean that the first Christian writers were unaware of the resemblances in a strongly Hellenized frame, nor that this very opposition would not be an excellent reason for a closer comparison, at least for a cultivated author like the fourth evangelist.

We might start to answer Brown's and Dodd's objections methodologically by pointing out that an objective examination of the question does not mean the text of John has to be summarily reduced to Dionysian texts completely unrelated to its tone or content. The anticomparatist allergy of many Bible scholars arises from the hasty assimilation of Christian texts to pagan texts that became fashionable at the turn of the nineteenth century, but to confuse a method applied badly with the method itself does not amount to a good alternative method. But this is only the start of the debate. When we turn back to the question of the Dionysian-type antecedents recognizable in the Yahwistic cult; these were known, at least in part, to many Jews in Jesus's

time and to the very first generations of Christians as, in my opinion, the Epistle to the Hebrews might show with its view of the Temple sacrifices as insufficient (until the possible allusion to the high priest entering the Holy of Holies "with the blood of others"—9:25) and opposed to the unique sacrifice of Christ,[9] and the same is possibly true of John as well. It is clear, however, that this gain in our knowledge at the same time adds to our difficulties, not only in establishing a profitable dialogue straddling the boundaries of the specializations concerned, but even more in winning acceptance for a reconstruction that refutes a firmly established series of interpretive *topoi* that center on a priori, decontextualized differentialism.

Let us establish some general points. The first really striking feature about the pericope of the marriage at Cana is its dense symbolic connotation, from its position at the outset of Jesus's public career to the manner of the miracle itself, beginning with the enigmatic dialogue between Christ and his mother when she asks him to do something about the sudden lack of wine; this is the only episode in John to involve Mary, apart from her presence at the foot of the cross, and so it is highly significant in Mariological terms. We can already infer from these features that the author is following a figural and *imaginalis* method similar to the one used in Hebrews, and similarly influenced by Plato's distinction between the suprasensible and sensible worlds, with the difference that the reconciliation of the two planes, although prepared for in God's plan for creation and prefigured in various parabolic examples of faith (πίστις), is not the final outcome of Christ's mission as stressed in Hebrews, but its initial premise, as set out in the Prologue. The plane of heavenly models, structured as a *typoi*/*antitypoi* pairing that should be understood in the reciprocal and transitive relationship of the two extremes, not only connects from the very beginning with the Son who is the *Logos* but finds in him the differentiating principle of all created things (Jn 1:3): one might go so far as to say that Plato's unwritten doctrine of the One and the Indefinite Dyad as the origin of all things is given theological and personal development here, coming by way of Middle-Platonic developments and the theme of personified divine Wisdom found in Middle Judaism.[10]

Leaving these points for the next chapter, we may note how the account of the marriage at Cana unfolds seamlessly (neither stitched together nor divisible, like Christ's own garment in the Passion as described in this same Gospel), an interweaving of narrative and symbolic levels, joined in the

person of Christ and in the great meditation *in figuris* that is the Gospel as a whole. In Jesus's mission, as it is set out in John, God's own ideas are revealed and become gradually accessible to men as the earthly existence of the incarnate *Logos* unfolds until it reaches its glorious fulfillment in the Crucifixion when the perfect union with the Father, which is the very definition of the Son, is made visible. Exactly as in Hebrews—though the development in John unravels and distends the transitional passages—there is no separation between theological ideas and history, because history is God's principal means to reveal himself, and that is the fundamental element that the Jewish mentality brought to interact with the legacy of Greek philosophy and metaphysics.

Certain consequences of the fourth Gospel's theological-narrative cohesion are somewhat foreign to our mentality. Not only is the shift from historical events to the divine plane valid but so is the reverse; and this is a feature common to all the biblical texts, but John's vision shows it at its most concentrated. Thus the divine plane, the object of the evangelist's meditation, is presented in a dramatic literary form that makes it quite clear and readable, and therefore figurally *true,* not literally but in its connection with the source of all truth, Truth itself. We shall have occasion to come back to this aspect, where the genius of Judaism, stimulated by what it had acquired from Greek metaphysics, gave of its best, and so made it possible for Christianity to bud and grow. Moreover, it raises the question, to be decided case by case, of how much historical truth is contained in any episode we are to comment on; this is a vital matter for us since we can no longer rely on commonly shared mediations, but must make them the subject of an independent philosophical and historical enquiry so as to enable us to restore phenomenological transparency to the mediations we are investigating. In this connection we have to recognize that the language and theological construction of the pericope of the marriage at Cana was developed in depth by the author; indeed, according to Meier, it is entirely his own work,[11] though considering the evangelist's efforts to faithfully preserve the traditions passed down to him, it might reflect an anecdote about Jesus as a young man, like the more legendary lines put to figural use in Matthew and Luke to tell the story of Christ's birth and childhood, a theme that later grew beyond all proportion in the apocryphal gospels.[12] But the theological import overshadows any other consideration. The miracle of turning water

into wine is one of the so-called miracles over nature, portentous acts revealing the power of the Son of God over the elements and natural forces. While the miracles of exorcism, healing, and resuscitation appear to have a basis in historical fact, the miracles over nature are demonstrative and symbolic in character, which, together with a series of textual elements, suggests they are not historical, with the partial exception of the miracles of the feeding of the multitudes which go back to a core story transmitted by the pre-Gospel tradition.[13]

These points increase the likelihood that comparative concerns form an integral part of the narrative and theological structure of the pericope, the author feeling them to be necessary at a time when Johannine Christianity was spreading in the face of opposition from Judaic factions, with growing internal divisions, and even with tension toward other Christian communities, seeing that the spread of the gospel message to the Gentiles was already underway and logically created new requirements and difficulties.[14] These were all factors urging a critical examination of Jewish religious history, and a thematic study of the right relationship to establish with the pagans. By way of a solution, the fourth Gospel proposes the person of Jesus as a point of synthesis for these themes, according to the symbolic-diegetic procedure described earlier. Although this provides no useful information from the historical-critical perspective, it complies with an *interpretatio* that could transmit something of the origin.

However, before we start our reading of the Johannine pericope, we need to clarify another inseparable aspect of it, Jesus's mediatory role for salvation; this is introduced and commented on in the marriage at Cana episode and, from John's perspective, is the sole justification for the Dionysian-type elements. This observation should suffice to rid the discussion of Bultmann's syncretism, on the one hand, and Brown's out-and-out differentialism on the other. The fourth Gospel wants to teach that the Jesus-*Logos* has the creational and eschatological power to render "all things new," to quote Revelation 21:5 (from Is 43:19), by conferring significance, the only true significance, on them. But how is this done and what are the underlying theological and historical assumptions? The answer to this question can help us to see the historical reality that the fourth evangelist must have taken up and reworked, using material coming from his tradition concerning the beginning of Jesus's mission.

## 2. The Son of Man and His Discipleship to John the Baptist

The account of the "sign" (*semeion*) of Cana—to use the term John most frequently adopts for a "miracle"—comes immediately after a solemn declaration by Jesus to the disciples he had just chosen: "Truly, I tell you: you will see heaven become accessible [*aneogota*], and the angels of God ascending and descending [*anabainontas kai katabainontas*] upon the Son of man" (1:51). This gives us the earliest Christological title, placed here by the evangelist on account of its significance as identification and at the same time as a foreshadowing of what was to happen in the public mission of the person thus identified.[15] The phrase refashions an older saying (*logion*), whose Christological title echoes Daniel 7:13, which the synoptics, for their part, insert at a dramatic moment in the Passion (Mt 26:64; Mk 14:62; Lk 22:69) when Jesus, insistently questioned by the chief priest and Sanhedrin, comes out into the open with a very similar Messianic declaration, providing an excuse for his accusers to have him charged with blasphemy and consequently put to death.[16] The sentence is couched in the classical language of the theophanies, with the difference that in John the opening of heaven takes on a nuance of transitive accessibility that I have tried to render in my translation, whereas the verb is usually simply translated as "open." The principal figure of the *logion* is the Son of man as mediator; the actual presence of the term in Middle Judaism is subject to much debate,[17] seeing that the corresponding expression in Daniel ("one like a Son of man"—7:13) stands for a manlike figure as distinct from the previous four beasts in the vision but refers to an enigmatic character of celestial (i.e., angelic) origin not recognizable in more individual features. The most reliable conclusion is that he represents the people of Israel,[18] and thus the one capable of restoring the sovereignty of God over it. To make the picture more fascinating, Oscar Cullmann convincingly links him to the myth of the archetypal ancestor of humanity made in God's image and transformed into the eschatological man, a myth developed in Paul's doctrine of Jesus as the second Adam,[19] and active in the Johannine use of the title as well, particularly in John 1:51 where the Son of man represents the originary unity of the divine and the human to be restored in Christ's final glorification.[20] In any case, the further step from the human/superhuman and mediatory status of the Danielic "one like a Son of man" is, in Jesus's words, a more versatile meaning of the "Son of man," susceptible

to designate both a simple human being and a figure charged with a divine mission.

Over and above the precise history of the title, what is certain is that the main Christian innovation is its assertion that the Son of man is Jesus Christ who acts as mediator between heaven, made accessible thanks to him, and mankind. In this regard, the evangelist uses the symbolic movement of the angels, mediatory figures par excellence that partially overlap with Christ in the earliest angelic Christology.[21] In the *logion* they ascend and descend on the Christic Mediator, which is expressed through the Greek *ano kato* that was used as a formula for sacrificial intermediation but with a humanizing and earthly sense here, encapsulating the ascending and descending movement that in John's Christology expresses the dynamic of salvation: the mediation of the Son is now fully present, in accordance with the fulfilled eschatology on which the pericopes of the marriage at Cana and the driving out of the moneychangers from the Temple come as an immediate commentary.[22]

The saying provides an opportunity to look into the theological workshop of John's Gospel, but also to examine the conditions surrounding the formation of the Christian mediation and the *Sitz im Leben* of the religious mediation presented by the historical Jesus. Before the Christological and Christic mediation there was in fact a Jesuan mediation that must bear some relationship to subsequent theological developments, not so much in order to give a priori credit to Christian claims to continuity but because of the ways in which religious mediations form and develop, whereby the *mythos* is always the retroacting outcome of history. This is eminently the case with the Judaic and Christian religion where history was made the place of revelation, starting with mediating personalities that appear to be historical even when they have mostly a figural or narrative substance (as in the case of Moses). Rather than decide beforehand whether the title of Son of man was claimed by Jesus himself or attached to him by his followers, we will let the relative historical-religious phenomenon speak for itself.

Taken together, the mysterious Son of man and the apocalyptic connotation of the *logion* about him show us the situation at the origin of the Christian mediation: the quest in Middle Judaism for a vicarious mediator to solve the enigma of "pagan" domination over the land of Israel, firstly by the Seleucids and then by Rome. Nevertheless, the adjective "pagan" is to be put into quotation marks since the category of "paganism" often conceals in the

Judaic world the problem of how to reach and define a proper solution for the unique divine mediation to which Israel felt itself destined. Therefore, the protest against paganism typical of the Maccabean propaganda that finally came true in the creation of strong nationalistic factions, actually conceals the much more urgent problem prevalent among the different Judaic religious parties in the fight for taking the lead in Palestine, and turns out to be not only the question about the right terrestrial mediator capable of making the Judaic heavenly mediator prevail, but ultimately the question about the proper definition of a divine *monos* that had to be both national and universal. This fruitful paradox was settled in theological-historical terms by the book of Daniel, where a decisive connection was made between the priestly theology of the Covenant with Yahweh and the Enochic protest against it,[23] that gave shape to a new apocalyptic genre needed to evaluate properly the Jesuan and proto-Christian expectations.[24] By taking this important transformation into account, we gain the interpretive tools to catch further historical layers and nuances of the enigmatic Son of man.

The figure of an authorized and authoritative mediator goes back, at least in the religious and ideological web of the final Bible text, to the monarch in the preexilic period, to the Anointed of Israel, to the Messiah (from Hebrew *Mašiah* through Aramaic *Mešiah,* translated into Greek as Χριστός), the name popularized by Christianity though it was neither the only one nor even the most commonly used. It is difficult to trace back to the original ideas through the many layers and accretions of the biblical texts, and the notion of an anointed king, as such depending on the religious power of the Jerusalem priesthood, is undoubtedly postexilic,[25] though I assume that the pre-Messianic expectation of an Immanuel (Is 7:14) destined to reign over the chosen people is the earliest clue traceable in the Bible and originates with the prophets.[26] The idea persisted tenaciously and was actually renewed during the exile but was then tragically interrupted following the murder of Zerubbabel at the start of the postexilic period. The exile saw a weakening of the king's authority and a larger part played by prophets and priests, and this is probably the very first explanation of the figure of a sacerdotal religious mediator alongside the figure of a politico-military chief. However, the return from exile, and the elimination of Zerubbabel, upset this precarious balance in favor of one side only, thanks to the refoundation of the so-called Second Temple and the establishing of the priestly power of the Sadducees.[27] And

yet, this was the paradoxical beginning of a Messianic kingly mediator who was not present and alive but projected into an undetermined future, and thus compatible both with the hope widespread among the popular classes and the concrete power in the hands of the Temple priesthood.[28] At the same time, the royal mediation sanctioned by God was as a matter of fact performed by the Persian king, whose Mazdaist religion had points of contact with Judaism in its tendency toward monotheism and in an eschatological and demonological vision that left many traces of itself in Judaism;[29] besides, the Persian king of kings was perfect device for keeping the Davidic figure at a theological and more comfortable distance. This complex situation was destined to continue for some time even after the conquest of Alexander the Great had subjected Israel to the prestigious influence of Greek culture, since the structure of theocratic power in Jerusalem remained unaltered.[30]

Nevertheless, the delicate compromise cunningly elaborated in the Persian period was not destined to last. In spite of its tenacious hold, the politico-social block of the priestly caste was pervaded by cracks, originating with a dissident minority mindful of the original sin of the Temple regime but growing wider and deeper as Hellenic rationalism penetrated. Palestine remained at peace under the dominion of the Ptolemies and at the start of the Seleucid period, but the same cannot be said for the reign of Antiochus IV Epiphanes when there was a renewed power struggle in Jerusalem. This led to anti-Sadducean reform of the Temple cult and to the subsequent revolt of the Maccabees, whose propaganda cleverly manipulated what had happened to make it appear an ideological conflict between Judaism and Hellenism while it was actually covering up various forms of compromise between the quarrelling factions.[31] It is at this stage that the problematic nature of the Yahwistic mediation starts to be interpreted as resulting from unworthiness, not only of Israel but of mankind as a whole marked by its original sin and powerlessness to save itself without God's active intervention. As a result, the Messianic expectations see a corresponding intensification with a proliferation of prophetic, royal, priestly figures, often enough combined with one another and united in a common goal, to redeem Israel (or its "holy remnant") and liberate it from internal injustice and the pagan menace. For several decades, under the more pragmatic Roman dominion, this second objective remained latent but continued to be harbored, fostering theological expectations and putting forward new ideas. The discovery

of the Qumran manuscripts has thrown considerable light on this period of outstanding religious creativity.

It is reasonable to assume for starters that Jesus took part in this debate and formulated his own personal position regarding these matters. What we must now do is to understand how he arrived at it and what his conclusions were. Our available information suggests only one possibility, namely, that he came to the debate, or at least studied it, as a follower of John the Baptist. There is no real foundation for denying this as Garbini does, basing his argument on the superficial observation that John and Jesus hold opposing doctrinal positions, as if their opposition were not the result of confrontation between a prophetic master and an exceptional pupil, and neglecting the fact that their basic eschatological and ethical visions have many features in common. Apart from these contextual facts, another point ignored by Garbini, but accepted by all research into the historical Jesus, is that the relationship between the two must be reliably founded in fact since it is attested by all four Gospels (the criterion of various witness) while it agrees little with the subsequent Christian image of the Son of man (the criterion of dissimilarity).[32]

The gospel narratives are manifestly tendentious in limiting Jesus's relations with John the Baptist to his baptism (the synoptics) or just to meeting him (John), as if Jesus were already aware of having an independent mission of his own. However, the catalytic role of Johannite ideas in Jesuan thinking and the prominent place of baptism as the sacrament of Christian initiation are both very good reasons for supposing there was a time of apprenticeship to the Baptist, and not a short time either. Surprisingly, in John 3:22—and 3:26—we find Jesus performing baptism. The editorial comment that follows in 4:2, explaining that it was not in fact Jesus himself but his disciples that baptized, only creates confusion; however, it allows us to conjecture that after his own baptism, he went on to baptize others, remaining close to John's positions, and the disciples did likewise since many of them probably were former followers of the Baptist converted to the ideas of the new prophet.[33] This very early and still Johannite phase of Jesus's career must have been a cause of embarrassment for the first Christian communities, while they were also facing competition from the Johannite communities, and this would explain the various textual strategies to acknowledge/reduce the Baptist's role and the restrictive comment in 4:2. Nevertheless, the practice

of baptism is still in use today, since Christianity in all its forms considers it an obligatory form of initiation to the faith and valid for all churches and all denominations according to the principle of *unum baptisma*. We would be hard put to explain this circumstance as just the memory of a single event, but it is even more improbable to regard it as an innovation of the Baptistic followers of Jesus and unrelated to his actual teaching.

A whole series of details firmly indicates the deep-rooted influence of the Baptist's teaching, though they bring with them the further question of Jesus's earlier education; the time he spent with John could not have taken up his entire youth, but it is a period about which we know nearly nothing. The silence of the sources regarding his formative years can in no way justify the cliché that the Son of God was illiterate,[34] knowing what he knew only by divine infusion, simply because that silence is mainly due to the Christological *interpretatio* of the Gospels or their sources. And yet the preaching of the prophet from Nazareth evinces impressive theological maturity and authentic virtuosity in scriptural exegesis, which favors the idea of education at a superior level. The episode in Luke where the twelve-year-old Jesus goes up to the Temple and astonishes the priests and scribes with his doctrinal knowledge is clearly constructed to serve symbolic and theological ends, like all the childhood episodes in Matthew and Luke; it might however come from a tradition about a relationship between Christ as a young man and some dissident figure in Israel's principle religious institution, so much so that Luke presents the Baptist as the son of a priest, setting the conception and birth of John and Jesus in close parallel, and so making it clear that the Temple ties of the two prophets, emphasized by their allegorical kinship, are an essential part of the story that the evangelist wants to transmit. The Lucan episode of Christ at the Temple shows a correspondence with the episode of the Jews in the Temple in John wondering at Jesus's learning acquired "without having followed a regular course of study [*grammata*]" (Jn 7:15), which confirms the level of education received by Jesus, completely in line with what was required for service at the Temple. But surely we need only restore the normal teacher/pupil relationship to the miraculously reversed anecdote in Luke and we obtain the scenario of an adolescent Jesus whose abilities astonish his teachers. This is conjectural, of course, but it needs to be said that if the episode occurred in the legendary life of some eminent Greek or Roman, no historian, whether agreeing with my hypothesis or not, would

have any particular difficulty in interpreting it as the mythical transfiguration of a real historical relationship. Be that as it may, just as surely as we can recognize Jesus's discipleship to the Baptist as an established historical fact, we must reject the hagiographic picture of a divine agent suddenly appearing out of the blue, deriving no support from the culture of the age he lived in. But, to return to that discipleship, what precisely was the orientation of the Baptist?

Jesus undoubtedly thought highly of him; this is clear from certain expressions recorded in the Gospels that could not have been invented by the proto-Christian communities.[35] And as for the Baptist's attitude to Jesus, we can glean some information from the episode, in Matthew and Luke, where the Baptist, imprisoned by Herod, sends two disciples to ask Jesus if he is the expected, pre-announced Mediator. Jesus's answer is indirectly affirmative, but it elicits no support from his master (Mt 11:2–6; Lk 7:18–23); this is another reliable detail since it differs from the Christian images of Jesus as the Son of God with the Baptist as his precursor.[36] There is some ambivalence in the episode, indicating a certain familiarity between one prophet, at the start of his career, and the other very close to the end, but it adds no details. What we can derive from this, by way of historical datum, is that the views of master and disciple remained divergent; if the Baptist had expressed support for Jesus, it could hardly have escaped the attention of Jesus's followers, especially as some had previously followed the Baptist. As narrated by the Gospels, what had probably remained an open question for the precursor is made to appear as humble submission. Fortunately, before we try to draw any conclusions about relations between Jesus and the Baptist, we are on more solid ground when we look at their ideas. Examining the transition from Johannite to Jesuan theology will enable us to see how far Jesus was indebted to the Baptist and in what way his teaching differed, and also to verify the historical validity of the Messianic title, Son of man, conferred on him.

John the Baptist took a great step forward by separating theological thinking about the sinful condition of Israel, and of mankind in general, from claims of a political and nationalistic nature; he insisted, instead, on the imminence of God's judgment, assisted by a divine agent whose coming John awaited to restore the sovereignty of Yahweh, through eschatological action that would be spiritual in character, not politico-military. In line with the preaching of the prophets, but with an apocalyptic note typical of

Middle Judaism, John could thus blame the deplorable state of Israel on the sins of the people and its leaders, calling on them to receive the baptism of penitence, a symbolic and sacramental sign of a palingenesis that remained collective, though it was the individual who had to repent and purify himself. There was no emphasis on the individual aspect, but it became recognizable as the Yahwistic mediation developed into a means to interpret history and humanity in its creatural nature, intensifying the transition from the objectivity of intermedial and ritual ties to the objectuality of their cognitive and moral retroaction. That transition, from the objective to the objectual, is the outcome of every human cultural mediation, but in Israel it took on unique theological intensity, summed up and concentrated in the figure of Jesus of Nazareth that was able to trigger the greatest objectuality from the mediation of the God of Israel, otherwise exposed to the risk of objective absolutizations that could easily harden into fanatical, destructive conflict. Judaic monotheism was still in a fluid and open phase, when its most urgent objective was to identify the historically and religiously effective mediator, leaving it to the events themselves, that is, to God in person, to make the definitive statement as to his real nature and his full sovereignty over history and the cosmos. Historians take no account of the essential factor that the eschatological visions abounding at the time and found throughout Jesus's own preaching, were also, and especially, an expression of the impatient waiting for God to undertake formulating the ultimate truth about himself. What we see here is an authentic performative theology of history, in which the plane of reflection and prophecy must necessarily be fulfilled on the plane of historical events guided by God.

Following the Baptist's spiritualistic approach, Jesus expanded its personal and moral resonances and took a further step, transforming it from a negative warning of impending divine punishment into a positive, breakthrough announcement of the Kingdom of God with himself as living testimony and reliable final guarantor, and with the corollary of an imminent, definitive revelation of the Father that sent him, not to be understood as bringing judgment and punishment, nor as the final battle between the forces of Good and Evil, but as accomplishing a spiritual reality that is already active, as fulfilling universally a truth already present in the hearts of those who freely subscribed to it. We shall see the subtleties and flexibility of the formula worked out by the follower of the Baptist, having got free of the

narrow vision of the final revelation that still affected his master. In short, Jesus wanted to present himself in the guise of a decisive spiritual mediator, though with sufficient circumspection not to create misunderstandings in his listeners or cause immediate lapses into the objectifying, normative tendencies of contemporary Judaism, by bringing to mind other mediatory figures incompatible with his innovative solution to the problem of how to attain Yahweh's saving mediation.

So, in all probability, this is why he used the somewhat indeterminate and fluctuating epithet of Son of man, and it is just as probable that he applied it to himself.[37] If in his sayings on the Son of man destined to come back in the role of eschatological judge Jesus were referring to him as a figure different from himself, as Bultmann definitely holds,[38] he would have lessened and made contradictory his own role as the decisive prophet of the new and definitive lordship of God over Israel, rendering his message very unclear, even incomprehensible. Bultmann's drastic interpretive bias is due to the need to free his existential Jesus from a feature decidedly mythical for a modern reader, given that the passage of Jesus to the condition of eschatological Son of man implies his transfiguration, probably during his earthly life, and a theophany putting an end to history. The mythical character of this picture is unquestionable, but Bultmann was misled by his rationalistic and inadequate interpretation of myth. It is objectively evident that if we were going to leave out from Jesus's preaching such a perspective it would become irremediably incomplete. Jesus would be acting as a simple messenger of a theological reality where his role would become completely undetermined, and on the other side that enigmatic Son of man would eschatologically appear out of nothingness, without any indication of his relationship with his messenger clearly doomed to be deprived of any authority. In this case, the innovative and powerful announcement of the former Baptist's disciple would lose at once its force and capacity to convince, introducing doubts and new questions instead of bringing a new and bright certainty. Besides, the fact that Jesus speaks of the Son of man in the third person was customary and is another clue of Jesus's cunning allusions to his own role, stressing both its objective meaning and his complete submission to the announced divine mediation.

The very ambiguity of the Danielic title, which could also be a mere periphrasis for "man," perfectly fits in this well-calculated communicative

strategy. It allowed Jesus to make allusions on different levels without compromising himself by Messianic claims that would attract the attention of the more extremist factions in Judaism to his detriment, besides rousing suspicion in the ruling class, covetous of its privileges and eager to avoid any conflict with the Romans. Here, too, the two criteria of various witness and dissimilarity militate in favor of the historicity of the epithet that sounded odd and restrained, or at least ambiguous, compared to the subsequent Christological title of Son of God. At the same time, the apparently more limited and ambivalent title of Son of man must have a structural relationship with the more challenging title of Son of God, which in turn is plainly connected with both Jesus's theology of God the Father and his awareness of the uniqueness of his own mediatory role. We only have to establish what kind of "sonship" we are talking about. Anyway, the Danielic title has been transmitted in numerous contexts and used in various ways, reflecting the true course of Jesuan preaching. Other contextual nuances besides these lend added force to its historical nature.

Jesus's prudence in using titles indicating his mission is itself evidence of how his proclamation had to contend constantly with the difficult historical and religious conditions that had inspired and fostered it, and this very difficulty added an unmistakable *pathos* to his preaching. His attack on the Temple ruling class actually implied God's eventual intervention to restore his sovereignty over Israel and the world and called for an infinitely willing agent, ready even to sacrifice his own life, as in the tragic examples of Zerubbabel and many prophets. And here we come to the other central aspect of Jesus's preaching and mission. Many scholars allow that Jesus faced up to the problem of the sacrifice of his own life toward the end of his public career—to deny this, as the case of Garbini shows, means to deny all historical value to the gospel sources—but we should add that this was the prospect looming before anyone committed to the difficult task Jesus had in mind, even more if we remember the historical-religious background of the Middle-Judaic debate and the fate suffered by John the Baptist.

All this fits in well with indications given in Mark and Matthew that Jesus started to preach after his temptation in the wilderness and Herod's arrest of John the Baptist (Mk 1:14–15; Mt 4:12–17),[39] since the first episode encapsulates in a figural description a critical moment of reflection for Jesus, regarding the direction he was to give to his vocation, while the second event,

the arrest of the Baptist, marked a watershed in Jesus's life, something that would hardly be plausible if he had not spent a significant length of time as a disciple of the Baptist. So, all things considered, we are justified in thinking of his coming to maturity in two phases: in the first, following his baptism, he begins to baptize on his own account but still from a Baptistic standpoint, according to the testimony transmitted by John; in the second phase, according to the evidence of the synoptics, his mission becomes independent of John because of the latter's arrest. It might indeed be claimed that the arrest of the Baptist caused a gnawing vexation, which is translated with particular emphasis by Matthew into the magnificent symbolic narrative of the three temptations, placed before the arrest in order to stress Jesus's divine provenance.

This also strongly suggests the possibility that the connection to the greatest Judaic text uniting the theme of a saving mediation and violent death, the Songs of the Suffering Servant or the Servant of Yahweh (*Ebed Yahweh*), is not an *interpretatio* made with hindsight by followers of the crucified prophet but goes back to Jesus in person,[40] to the crucial moment when he decided to preach to the people, extending and inverting his master's approach, and imagining the risks he ran in pursuing the vocation he felt to be his. Going into further details, the Suffering Servant as scriptural forerunner of the Son of man is clearly a perfect starting point for other Christological titles as the Son of God and the Lamb of God through the Greek translation of *Ebed Yahweh* as *pais tou theou* or *amnos tou theou:*[41] while the appellative "Lamb of God" became a liturgical formula, the archaic notion of *pais,* meaning both child/son and servant, was very early replaced by the more theological condition of *huios,* son, a divine sonship in any case strictly defined by Jesus's obedience to his Father up to the sacrifice of his own life.[42] This means that Jesus's filial relationship with God has solid roots in his self-awareness of having received a unique mission by his Father, and already entails an understood title of Son of God,[43] though we must not interpret such an exceptional role in the later terms of theological preexistence. In short, we have a tight combination of the criteria of dissimilarity and similarity, beyond those of multiple attestation and consistency, and there is an immediate correspondence to the mission and fate of John the Baptist, with a likely process of awareness on Jesus's part when his mentor was arrested.

Moreover, Jesus's implied self-designation as the Suffering Servant is

closely connected to the question of his Davidic descent, which we must judge to be historical simply because the related title "Son of David," besides sounding dangerously political after the first Judaic war, is not easily compatible with the more developed Christological titles and already caused misunderstanding when Jesus was preaching, which can be seen from the paradoxical objection he formulates about the human nature of David compared to the divine provenance of the Son of man, an objection that might not intend to confute the idea of descent from David but to suggest its profound significance.[44] These elements support the hypothesis that Jesus not only accepted the title, whether true in fact or not, but traced it back principally to the theological split following the murder of the lawful descendent of David. This division had undermined postexilic Judaism as a whole ever since; at the same time, it had fostered within Judaism the greatest flowering of theology in the ancient world. Seen in this light, Jesus appears to be interpreting himself as a new Zerubbabel, come to bring about the legitimate Kingdom of God not in dynastic but in spiritual terms, implicitly declaring his readiness to pay the price of the Suffering Servant in Deutero-Isaiah, and so transform the bloody fate awaiting David's heir into an atoning sacrifice for all mankind. There can be no doubt that in accordance with the religious and intermedial culture of antiquity, Jesus conceived of this faithfulness to Yahweh *usque ad mortem* as an act performatively effective in itself, like some kind of emergency device, valid for reestablishing Yahweh's majesty among men, a kingship otherwise abandoned and rejected. At this point, the mainspring of the Jesuan mission appears to be an aversion to Judaism for having abandoned its God-appointed role and sullied itself with the tremendous original sin underlying the establishment of the Second Temple, and it also carries a strong connection to the Baptist's harsh public criticism of the ruling class and of the people. This is no more than a series of linked hypotheses, although formed on the basis of solid indications; its real value would lie in its capacity to make the available data interact so as to create a consistent whole from the information and thus make the Christ phenomenon more recognizable.

These are the background facts that can help to give us a better idea of the possible attitude of Jesus to the dangers implied by his choice. We find exactly these same coordinates in the first theological-narrative sequences of the fourth Gospel, reshaped to fit its metaphysical-incarnationist framework

but still fully recognizable. Situated as it is, immediately after the Prologue and its statement of mankind's rejection of the *Logos,* the authentic Christophany conveyed by the Baptist, while evidently altering the historical facts, does no more than develop an originary theological nucleus, that is, the characterization of he who should come as "the Lamb of God that takes away [*ho airon*] the sin of the world [*tou kosmou*]" (1:29), with the most directly expiatory *interpretatio* of the *Ebed Yahweh.* The participle of αἴρω, probably selected by the evangelist as he glossed his source, takes on the sense of forgiveness here, deduced from the LXX, which is the version of the Hebrew Bible most frequently used by the evangelists,[45] and has the atoning meaning of "taking on himself." The sacrificial, atoning connotation of the Lamb of God, recognized by the Baptist in Jesus, is quite clear, and the perspective of the Gospel of John shows us the key moment in this handing-over from the precursor to the *Logos* made flesh.

The fact of Jesus's baptism with water by John finds a place in the synoptic tradition but is passed over in silence here, not only because it is felt to be incompatible with the fourth Gospel's exalted Christology but above all because it is subsumed and transfigured in baptism with the Holy Spirit, which the entire Gospel undertakes to relate in its real, overwhelming significance. However, the fittest explanation is that the fourth evangelist wants us to pay less attention to the material gesture of baptism and more attention to its symbolic equivalence to the future death of Jesus the Suffering Servant and the Lamb of God, both designating his glorification as the Son of God. The first two pericopes, telling of the Baptist and Jesus's encounter with the first disciples, share a common theme of re-cognition, the repetition of a known experience leading to growing awareness and knowledge: Jesus is recognized by his first interlocutors ("We have found the Messiah"—1:41), and he in turn recognizes names, places, and personal identities. It is as if everything and everybody received their authentic names and roles for the first time, a second, liberating repetition of the scene—dear to Walter Benjamin—in the Garden of Eden where God empowers Adam to name all living creatures.[46] From the beginning—*en arche,* as the first syntagma of the Prologue expresses it—the divine mediation makes itself available in its transitive, object-creating totality, and mankind, which normally looks ahead, must look back to be converted, must contemplate an origin normally disregarded and neglected ("Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?"—1:46). The

only real, object-producing transcendence is not to be reached by narrowing one's view to the unknown but by opening one's eyes on what one thinks one knows but does not know. Nothing could be easier and nothing more tremendously difficult. And for it to become possible, the descending movement of the *Logos* made flesh and of the Spirit that descends on him "like a dove from heaven" (1:32) has to coincide with the upward movement of the *Logos* crucified and despised by all men.

This gives us an adequate understanding of the final integration of the archaic *logion* with the Son of man, in a two-way upward-downward movement already looking ahead to the complete revelation of Christ in the Passion, to a victorious Christophany on the cross itself, which is one of the most important theological concepts in John. But it also helps us to understand the following pericope of the marriage at Cana, whose wealth of figural meaning we can now begin to explore in all its relevance. And we can start by determining the presence of Dionysian elements in the textual fabric.

### 3. Dionysian Elements at Cana

The *logion* with the Son of man is situated in a kind of pivotal position that confirms that the role of the pericope of the marriage at Cana is to illustrate the nature, manner, and purpose of the mission Jesus is about to undertake. Here it is:

> Three days later there was a marriage [*gamos*] at Cana in Galilee, and Jesus's mother was there, and Jesus and his disciples were also invited to the wedding [*gamos*]. And as the wine had run out, Jesus's mother said to him: "They have no more wine." Jesus answered her: "What have I to do with you, woman [*gynai*]? My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servants. "You are to do whatever he tells you." There were six stone jars there for the purifying of the Jews, each holding two or three measures. Jesus told them: "Fill the jars with water"; and they filled them to the brim [*ano*]. Then, again: "Now draw from them and take it to the master of the feast [*architriklino*]." And they took it to him. When he had tasted the water changed into wine, the master of the feast who did not know where it came from—but the servants that drew the water knew—called

> the bridegroom to him and said: "Every man [*pas anthropos*] serves the good wine first and, when they are drunk [*methysthosin*], the wine that is not so good; instead, you have kept the good wine till now."
>
> Jesus gave this beginning [*epoiesen archen*] to his signs [*semeion*] at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory [*doxan*], and his disciples believed [*episteusan*] firmly in him.
>
> After that, he went to Capernaum, with his mother, his brethren, and his disciples, and stayed there not many days. (Jn 2:1–12)

The first thing to do when faced with a text like this is to determine its language, and here not a few difficulties arise for the modern reader accustomed to distinguishing between narration, argument, and symbol, whereas, for the evangelist, those planes interpenetrate each other and are live parts of a single ongoing reality. He follows the figural method, already considered in the previous volume, in discussing the Bible and the Epistle to the Hebrews in particular where it is imposingly deployed for illustrating the *figurae Christi* of the Jewish scriptures, starting from Christ's acceptance of pouring his own blood for the new mediation between heaven and earth; but there is an added difficulty in John since the density of representation achieved at culminating moments in the Epistle, such as Christ's offering of himself and Abraham's sacrifice "by faith," is now joined to the narrative breadth of the Old Testament texts and to their polyphonic variety of registers and strata. The theological force of Hebrews is distended, expanded, and transformed into a mysterious diegetic sequence, interspersed with dialogues that offer opinion and comment, but rather than make things clearer, they only add enigma to enigma. All this is the result of a highly calculated procedure intended to involve the believer, that is, the individual who wants to experience the *pistis* in Jesus, in such a way that he lives it as the story unfolds; thus the Christic experience of the complete giving of oneself that takes the form of the public mission of Jesus crowned by his death and resurrection is already attained on the page, or rather in the resonance that the page excites in the listener.

The collective import of the gospel texts has too often been insisted on in the Catholic exegesis, forgetting that they are addressed in the first place to every single individual struck by the good news of Christ, much as Jesus's preaching must have been. Bultmann's exegesis no doubt provides an

appropriate corrective to this tendency.[47] Communion, the community, is always the result of the freely given allegiance of individuals, and that is the measure of its value and of the transcendence of the collective, coercive logic of human communities. Émile Durkheim, who so perceptively noted this collective logic, added that only the creative opposition of individuals that are conscious of the coercion and invert it has the capacity to achieve progress in society and confer the retroactive vision that society's various logics of survival continually take away. This is the route by which the savage brings the solidarity of the "totemic meal," conceived as the most archaic form of sacrifice,[48] as the remembering made possible by the dismembering of a single member of the community, is transformed in Christianity into a solidarity of another type, into a community of free members, owing their freedom to the mediation of one person who is willing to pay the ultimate price in order to leave an indelible remembrance of himself that re-members those touched by it, with fundamentally different results. These comments are enough for us to understand that everything in the account of the first of "his signs" is explicable with a double register of this world and the next, the unity of which we must come to grasp since it is the key of coordination and encounter, the key each believer-reader has to identify for himself, and realize in himself as far as he is able to comprehend it.

Beyond any comments of a general nature, the narrative's double figural register is recognizable in a series of otherwise inexplicable incongruities: the lack of information identifying the bridal pair, the first thing anyone wants to know at a wedding, ancient or modern; the circumstance that Mary is not named, either here or throughout the Gospel; the surreal dialogue between Jesus and his mother, whom he addresses with the respectful bare vocative γύναι, similar in connotation to the Latin *domina,* meaning "lady"; the strange figure of the *architriklinos* that I have tried to render by a generic "master of the feast," which rather suggests a lavish ceremony, hardly the case in rural Galilee; the abnormal capacity of the jars or hydriae; and the total absence of any reaction on the part of the mysteriously elusive bridegroom. In my view, Dionysian symbolism is an integral, defining part of this allegorical fabric.

The exegetes raise three main objections to the inclusion of such symbolism here: that the element of violence typical of the Greek god is absent, that his mythology contains no direct episodes of water being changed into

wine, and that the pericope of the marriage at Cana does not equate wine and blood. We will take these points one by one.

The first objection is the easiest to overcome. Its basis is an arbitrary assumption that to see an analogy to Dionysus in the episode is to equate him with Christ when in fact it is precisely this analogy that clearly shows the difference between the cruelty of the Greek god and the Jesuan message. The objection rejects the very principle of serious comparative analysis, and so deserves to be rejected itself.

The second objection stays on the surface of the problem, concerning itself with fragmentary aspects alone, without considering them as a whole. Dionysus is the god of ritual liquids associated with sacrifice because those liquids prepare, accompany, and follow sacrifice, and the basic fact is that they are mixed and switched in performing the rite because they come to serve but one final purpose. Dionysus is the god par excellence of switching and metamorphoses, and there is only one explanation for metamorphic processes in the ancient world: sacrifice, which changes death into life, animal or man into divinity, and participants in the rite into mythical beings personifying it. The consequence of all this is that the Dionysian liquids run into one another, with blood dominant, both symbolically and actually. For example, the following verses, taken from the messenger's first report in the *Bacchae,* describe the bloody bacchanal celebrated by the Theban women driven to madness by the god:

> One seized her thyrsus and struck a stone
> from which burst forth a spring of fresh water;
> another disturbed the earth with her narthex,
> and the god sent a jet of wine gushing out.[49]

The entire sequence is dominated by the liquids coming before the rite: immediately before this, the maenads suckle fawns and wolf cubs, and it is immediately followed by a description of a spring of milk and rivers of honey gushing from the thyrsi. The tone of this is typically Greek, with behavior that subverts natural relationships and roles and, as such, precedes the unleashing of ritual violence in which all the Dionysian liquids reveal their identity with the blood of dismembered and devoured victims. The metamorphosis of one ritual liquid into another is therefore an essential part

of the Dionysian cult and its symbolism, and there is no need to look for literal equivalents that would not, in any case, convince those who refuse a priori to believe there could be anything in Dionysian rites likely to interest the author of the fourth Gospel and his lofty theological ends. We need to realize that cults of the Dionysian type contained a whole body of ritual with relative theological reflections that was connected with the god's fluids and the sacrificial experience substantiating him, and it should have been made sufficiently clear in the first volume just how rich those reflections were. The matter is explained most consistently and contextually, not as religious or disciplinary contamination, but by assuming the evangelist wanted to reappraise the world of Greek religion and give it an opposite meaning, derived from the teachings of Jesus.

I first developed this argument in the 1990s in relation to the marriage at Cana in John,[50] which is explained further here, and in itself that was proof enough; however, it is fully and independently confirmed by the Dionysian-type roots of the Yahwistic cult that date from before the religious and cultic syncretism of the Hellenistic and Roman era, archaic roots closely having to do both with human sacrifice and fertility rituals linked to a female companion of Yahweh, Asherah or also Anat.[51] This fact takes us beyond the conventional, antihistorical view of ancient Judaism and of the relationship between Jewish and Greek culture, and cancels reassuring but artificial distinctions; a very different, stimulating scenario appears before our eyes, made up of contamination and influence, of documented reflection no less than meditative advance. The fourth Gospel, with this undercurrent of Dionysian symbolism in its account of the convivial miracle at Cana, wants to tell us something about the relationship of Jesus's teaching to pagan religions and, still more, about its relationship to the troubled, obliterated history of the Judaic religion. Finally we must answer the third objection: that the episode establishes no sacramental parallel between wine and blood.

This last objection appears even more out of context, in this case the context of John and Christian theology. The better commentators willingly grant that the "hour" not yet come for Jesus is the hour of his crucifixion, and happily assert that wine equates with blood in the institution of the Eucharist, recorded by Paul and the synoptics.[52] As we saw with Hebrews, any mention of the Eucharist sets off a remarkable allergic reaction in some commentators that excludes all possibility of allusions or multiple references in polysemic,

complex writings such as the more fully developed New Testament texts, even allusions where the subject is a sacrament central to the liturgical life of all Christian communities, allusions that are paraded elsewhere as a theological background justifying any kind of illation. It is true that the fourth Gospel, even in the most explicit sequence regarding the Eucharist in chapter 6, does not speak of wine but only of bread sent down from heaven, a commentary on the miraculous multiplication of the two loaves and five fishes; and a little later (6:51b–58) it considers the need to eat the flesh and drink the blood of the Christic Mediator, which is probably a later gloss.[53] And yet the liturgical formula of the Eucharist must be deemed to have been known in Johannine circles as well, considering that, in the interpretation of Jeremias and Brown, it was cut and shifted to the earlier glossing passage mentioned above, for theological motives that we shall be investigating.[54] The necessity of drinking the savior's blood is certainly not a reference to some vampire-like ritual but is the liquid equivalent of the flesh into bread transformation, and listeners would have needed no special gloss to understand that what was being talked about was wine. Certainly there is some reticence, but it can be explained by the need to dissociate the wine of the Eucharist from the wine used in violent rites where the drunkenness of those taking part was to be expected. In fact, all the texts describing the institution of the Eucharist recorded by the other New Testament sources avoid similar confusion by *always* using metonyms or periphrases to refer to wine, in line with the Judaic practice: in 1 Corinthians 11:25–26 only the "cup" is mentioned; in the synoptics, on the other hand, wine is discreetly indicated as the "fruit of the vine" (Mt 26:29; Mk 14:25; Lk 22:18). The absence, then, of any explicit mention of the Eucharistic wine, contrary to what those who would deny the Dionysian parallel maintain, tacitly proves the parallel and reflects the very great care taken to avoid possible confusion with Dionysian rituals—which ought to be reassuring for all those exegetes fearful of perilous *mésalliances,* since the intention to compare religion and ritual closely and carefully is here clearly recognizable.

We will now look at the repercussions and developments of these premises, since they are interwoven in a more organic and complex structure, grounded for the most part in the theological and religious competition with Judaism.

## 4. Nuptial Symbolism

If we start by assuming that Dionysian symbolism—and at this point we can also say paleo-Yahwistic symbolism—is an integral part of the pericope, the reading that results is more comprehensive compared to traditional interpretations, and we strip the original draft-text clean of all veneer of theological prissiness and liturgical formalism. Any lingering doubts about the Dionysian connotations of the wine are removed by the master of the feast's straightforward, objective description of its effects; the verb he uses is unambiguous but often sanctimoniously euphemized in modern translations. This drunkenness, as presented in the Gospel, was evidently normal and made it possible for the more parsimonious hosts to bring out the worst wine when his guests were no longer in a state to notice the difference. It is into this not very edifying scenario that the evangelist introduces Jesus, his mother, and the disciples. This Dionysian detail of the effects of wine calls for no exegetic knowledge, but it allows us to add some valuable nuances if we ruminate over the passage after we have read it, which is certainly what the evangelist wanted in order to achieve his ends: Mary's words about the lack of wine not only signal the fact that she already knows about her son's powers, which could come from a source concerning the preministry miracles of Jesus,[55] but also that she is lucid and sober, introducing thereby a subtly figural register because we sense that the wine she is asking for is of a quite different order to the good and bad wines the master of the feast has in mind. Her words to the servants following her son's sibylline reply express her complete trust in his will and her awareness of his divine provenance and resulting mission. And the shopkeeper's logic of the master of the feast is subverted by Jesus's miraculous gesture because his wine, the better wine, is qualitatively different from the alcohol intended for run-of-the-mill carousal.

Besides, the skillful narrative strategy of the evangelist creates the right overall connotation, even before our attention is drawn to the details. This is the first "sign" given by Jesus, and it begins what many specialists of John call the Book of Signs, chapters 2–12, while chapters 13–20 constitute the Book of Passion or Glory (the Prologue, with chapter 1, and chapter 21 providing an overall frame).[56] The sign given at Cana is thus the initial manifestation of the Son of God, anticipated in the scenes of Christological recognition in the preceding pericopes and in the *logion*-link about the Son of man, while

the reference to three days comes to give a symbolic foreshadowing to his death and resurrection.[57] However, if we want to understand the passage, we need to beware of any undue influence of mere theology.

The overall symbolism of the pericope would appear to be perfectly clear: the wedding represents the marriage of Israel (in Hebrew the word is feminine) to its God in the person of Jesus.[58] This is a leitmotiv of several parables in the synoptics, where stress is laid on the need to prepare for the wedding, through certain persistent themes: putting oil in the lamps beforehand, dressing suitably in clean clothes, and occupying the last places in an attitude of humility. The thematic resemblance could even justify Dodd's interesting conjecture "that the traditional nucleus of this pericope may have been a parable, in which, as in other parables, the setting was a wedding feast,"[59] though the climax of the wine miracle—not a teaching to be drawn from a simple and popular story—makes the conjecture unlikely. Besides, we must not forget that the parenetic, moralizing accents of most of the wedding parables, accentuated by a long homiletic tradition, have to be traced back to the interpretation/redaction of the Christian communities and the evangelists,[60] and go beyond the theme's Messianic and eschatological core, clearly to be seen, on the other hand, in the Baptist's final witness to Jesus in the fourth Gospel where he states: "He who has the bride is the bridegroom," identifying himself as "the friend of the bridegroom" (3:29), whose business is to respectfully stand aside so that the marriage can take place. This theological movement foreshadows, in parable, the violent death awaiting the Baptist and also, above all, anticipates the fate of the Lamb of God. These various Messianic, eschatological, and testimonial motifs are met once more in the "marriage of the Lamb" (*gamou tou arniou*) in Revelation 19:9, which turns out, at 21:9–10, to be explicitly a marriage with the heavenly Jerusalem, with the redeemed Israel of the last days. The link to Revelation is all the more significant since it is not the work of a Johannine community and yet it knows and glosses the fourth Gospel.[61] Stated briefly, for Middle Judaism this marriage represents the final fulfillment of Yahweh's pact with his people; it is the eschatological event that all the different Jewish religious factions, with their varying emphases, were waiting for, apart presumably from the Sadducees who had an interest in upholding the adequacy of the Temple cult in Jerusalem, while the Pharisees for their part added a warning to prepare by scrupulously fulfilling all the works required by the Law.

But how did Jesus himself interpret the theme? It is best if we start with the synoptics since their treatment is the most varied and extensive.

The principle connotation of the marriage parables in the synoptics, it seems to me, is that the fabular folk aspects are quite inseparable from the aspects of everyday life, which also characterized the preaching of Jesus who possessed the art of expressing theological matters of enormous importance through this universally accessible register. And this statement is supported by the probable Jesuan authenticity of the parable of the great supper, according to the strict examination of Meier.[62] Thus Jesus has used the eschatological metaphor of the feast to indicate the coming of the Kingdom, but a further connotation must not be excluded if we take into account the possibility that he connected himself with the incarnate spirituality of the Song of Songs: once we do, we will recognize, in John, an implicit identification of Jesus with the Bridegroom, integrated by the synoptic tradition with an open Christological sense of his figure. If we look into the popular origins of these stories more deeply we pick up some pointers to the mentality that Jesus made his own: among ordinary, simple people, especially in the countryside where Jesus very much liked to move around, weddings provided a precious occasion for showing off some of the wealth normally hidden away, with plenty to eat and drink as well. The parables glide over this simple taste for merrymaking, family get-togethers, and village festivities, which can easily mislead, and they tend to give a disinterested and nobly generous slant to pleasure-in-plenty whereas, in the meager lives of country folk, the satisfaction was certainly material, albeit short-lived. Now, however, with the arrival of the divine Bridegroom, the food becomes a symbol for a new and definitive eschatological state, a joy that will not be fleeting; and there is only one name, favored by the dominant image of matrimony, for the definitive status acquired by the wedding guests: love, both the love that God reserves for the guests he has invited, redeeming all their wretchedness, and the love his guests will be able to show one another and enjoy with God forever, in an affectionate family atmosphere—the love, we might add, that the rabbi of Nazareth has for his people, identifying with their modest aspirations and showing them the way to complete spiritual and objectual redemption. The rural Galilean aspect, on which the most recent research into the historical Jesus concentrates, is fully recognizable here, but with no narrow political or poverty-embracing sense, since the condition of the poor is valid insofar as it

makes it easier to enter the Kingdom, rather than being an ontological, ethnic condition after the fashion of the Judaic extremists. We can understand that for Jesus, as in ancient Taoism, the greatest strength lay in weakness acknowledged as such and used as a means of objectual ascent, but personalized in a way that detaches it from every cosmic register and transforms it into a vertical, absolute relationship to God.

We will go back now to the inner dynamic of Jesuan thinking as it can be reconstructed from existing sources. And the feasibility of such reconstruction is quite evident from the contextual nature and originality of what emerges. Our interest here is to discover what traces remain of this theological-popular pattern in the fourth Gospel, where the Galilean origin of Jesus's preaching is not disdained in any way but modified from within. This is made clear by various details that prevent us reading the scene as a lesson exhorting poverty: the banquet is itself sumptuous, and the key moment, the identification of the bride and groom and their public recognition, is put off to the very end since it has been implicitly stated at the start: "and Jesus's mother was there, and Jesus and his disciples were also invited to the wedding." As an opening it appears quite neutral, and the closing corresponds symmetrically: "After that, he went to Capernaum, with his mother, his brethren, and his disciples, and stayed there not many days." This acts as a link to the pericope of the expulsion of the moneychangers from the Temple and follows the now established course of events in the life of Jesus, adding the historical and at the same time symbolic detail of the "brethren," which will call for our attention.[63] Here, then, is a technique of slippage and diversion, characteristic of the procedure of John, extending to us a concealed invitation to identify Jesus, his mother, and his disciples as the new, true family he has come to bring among mankind.

The eventual transition to the scene of Mary and the Beloved Disciple at the foot of the cross becomes inevitable, and confronts us with an extremely exalted figural register whose various strata and nuances need unraveling. In what sense do Jesus, his mother, and his disciples form a new family and start a marriage decisive for the salvation of mankind? Obviously, the sexual connotations all disappear and are replaced by spiritual ones, but the convivial setting of the story and the Dionysian connotation of the miracle make it clear to us that this is no disincarnate and purely immaterial reality. Before we come to a comparison with the pagans, which certainly must lie within

the semantic and historical spectrum of the pericope, we need to turn our minds to the form of Dionysianism nearest in space and furthest in time, that is, the orgiastic elements in the Yahwistic cult, vestiges of which were still present in the Temple in Jerusalem when it was sacked by the Romans.[64] In other words, the history and prehistory of the figural motif of the marriage of Israel to Yahweh has to include the archaic *hieros gamos* ritual, the coupling of the king of Israel with a hierodule representing Asherah, the consort of Yahweh, where the son sacrificed in the *molk* took the place of the monarch vicariously.

This background supplies the interpretive missing link between the Judaic context of the story's setting, to which the gospel writer still refers in the main, and the pagan details that otherwise would end up appearing as accessory since the traditional view dates them later, after the Christian message had spread to the Gentiles. To the contrary, the massive historical presence of the ritual of the sacrificial hierogamy at the heart of Israel's religion and cult strips away any veneer suggesting it was merely juxtaposed and alien, and brings to the surface a succession of events within Middle Judaism that were fraught with theological and cultural consequences according to whatever position was adopted in regard to them.[65] The spiritual marriage between Jesus and Mary takes the place of the ancient bloody ceremony ensnared in violent eroticism. However, the evangelist could not compare one *gamos* too closely with the other on account of the obvious misunderstandings that would have arisen; also, perhaps, because it would have thrown too much discredit on Judaic religious institutions, since the author, besides being aware that Jesus belonged fully within Judaism, still felt himself close to Israel and wanted to enjoy its legacy. Moreover, the miracle has an inchoative and proleptic function, making it advisable not to waste words, to postpone explanations and more detailed examination until later.

Explaining, then, that the text intends to tacitly underline the fact that Jesus and Mary are the real actors is necessary but insufficient in itself since the nuptial symbolism is not completely justified. However, this deliberate omission becomes more comprehensible if we suppose that the author of John wanted to convey, to those aware like himself of the real tenor of the old Temple rituals, that this was something fundamentally different, with however no open condemnation, since the miracle is intended to make us reflect on the transforming power of the person and word of the Son. Only Jesus has

the power to invert the Dionysian rites, whose savage combination of desire and bloodshed had provoked the protests of Heraclitus in ancient Greece; only Jesus can transform them into a miraculous matrimonial process and bring forces to definitive objectuality that were otherwise bound to result in a bloody finale, as in the *Bacchae*. The official bridegroom at the feast in Cana says nothing because the real Bridegroom is of another nature, while the bride remains modestly in the background, veiled in the good-natured humility of Jesus's mother.[66]

Exploring the passage's surprising links with the ensuing pericope about the expulsion of the moneychangers from the Temple makes perfectly credible that a specifically Judaic hypotext of sacrifice and hierogamy should form a constitutive part of the textual structure. The version of the episode given in the synoptics and John calls for a separate treatment, and a fairly extensive one since it offers an opportunity to pick up and coordinate various threads we have unraveled so far in postexilic Judaism and its dramatic counterhistory. A neglected chapter in Judaic *and* Christian religious history comes to life through a dense and highly allusive hypotextual network, conferring substance and breadth on the event, which is narrated by all four Gospels, opening up exciting scenarios and posing hermeneutic dilemmas for which the fourth Gospel marks a point of arrival.

## 5. The Expulsion of the Merchants from the Temple

Traditionally the expulsion of the merchants is called the cleansing of the Temple. The same word is used in Nehemiah 13, the Old Testament hypotext, where Nehemiah, governor of Judea, tells how he threw Tobiah out of the sanctuary, Tobiah being eponymous for the Tobiads, a powerful family that had grown rich in the Hellenistic period with the support of the Temple institution.[67] (This anachronism means the manuscript dates from late Hellenistic times, and not the Persian period.[68]) But to talk of cleansing as a sheer religious purification misses the point: the Son of man did not want to cleanse the Jerusalem cult in a ritual and moral sense; he wanted to replace it with a religious reality of a different character,[69] not to reform the cult but to subvert it from within, or indeed, as John Dominic Crossan says, to carry out its "symbolic destruction."[70] This subversive meaning was acquired at the

time the proto-Christian communities broke with their coreligionists, while a similar split had just occurred within the Johannine church; Jesus's action can be seen as the first move toward that break and can be explained by his knowing all about the bloody, crypto-pagan elements in Judaism's central cult and the dreadful crime at its foundation.

Numerous hints appear throughout John to suggest there was awareness of skeletons in the imposing Temple closet, and it is made explicit in the central episode of chapter 8, where Jesus clashes with the Jews, by which is meant the Judaic leadership in particular. The encounter takes place in (or close by) the Temple treasure room,[71] its strong room, since the Temple was effectively a great banking institution, the most important in the ancient East, in line with an old ritual practice that saw gold and coin as just so many pieces of the divinity, to be dismembered and re-membered in the ebb and flow of economic and financial life. The Jews declare they have God as their father and are not the children of "fornication" (*porneias*—8:41), that is, of idolatry, possibly with a slanderous slur on Jesus's birth, which was probably already widespread at the time of the fourth Gospel;[72] and he answers them with the following words:

> If God were your father, you would love me, since I proceed and come from God; indeed, I do not come of myself, but He [*ekeinos*] sent me. And why do you not understand what I say? Because you cannot hear my word [*logon*]. You come from your father, the devil [*diabolou*], and you will do what your father desires. He [*ekeinos*] was a murderer [*anthropoktonos*] from the beginning [*ap'arches*], and never kept to the truth because there is no truth in him. When he tells a lie he speaks for himself, since he is a liar and the father of falsehood. (8:42–44)

In the Johannine Gospel Jesus speaks like a preexisting, self-aware divine being. We can understand this register if we remember that Christ is the *Logos* in this Gospel, the Word of God existing from all time and incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, who is therefore the original expression of God, the source of all words, speaking for itself comprehensively. There can be no obscurity, no areas less meaningful: everything becomes effable in Jesus because he is the incarnation of the ineffable. Consequently, we must forget all psychological criteria of verisimilitude, which is not at all to imply that Christ in

John has nothing of the historical Jesus about him, since the evangelist aims at restoring the originary resonance and reaching the semantic source of his mission and teaching.

The salient phrase is the description of the devil as "murderer from the beginning." Girard lays stress on this as the formula used to describe the founding of cultures on the murder of victims, analogous to the expression found in Matthew, "things hidden since the foundation of the world,"[73] though it would be wrong to attribute a modern kind of anthropological awareness to the evangelists. The *arche* in John, like the *katabole* in Matthew, is a theological and creational commencement that can be repeated in the course of history and leads to salvation if it fits in with God's plan, or leads astray if counter to it. In that case it becomes an anticreation ascribable to God's adversary, the devil or Satan, conceived as a real spiritual principle but devoid of the divine and ontological nature proper to God. The symmetry of the antagonism, or rather the symmetrical logic with which the devil maintains his antagonistic role, is brought out by the repetition of the demonstrative pronoun ἐκεῖνος, indicating—as in some fragments of Heraclitus[74]—an objective mediatory reality open to interpretation in two ways. Seen against this background, Jesus's allusion in the fourth Gospel is not so much to the Fall of Man and the Garden of Eden as to the story of Cain's murder of Abel: Judaic apocalyptic writings include the idea that the first human sin was the Cainite sin,[75] but still more specific and intriguing here is the idea of a covert reference to the regicide (Zerubbabel = Abel) carried out by Joshua, a Cainite.

If we limit ourselves to a generic reading of original sin, we miss the *quid* of Jesus's hostility toward the Jewish chiefs, an interpretive lacuna that has given rise to an anachronistic charge of anti-Semitism, against John in particular. The attack on the Jews in the fourth Gospel is explained by a specific crime, the murder of Zerubbabel, concealed and hushed up because it was the secret foundation of the prestige and power of the Temple institution. For this reason, lying has a genealogical, generative role in the lives of the Jews, who are incapable of recognizing the truth in compliance with a logic that is, before everything else, objective, situational, and genetic: the Jews attacked by Jesus had in fact heard him speak but failed to grasp the real significance of his words, so that the diabolical genealogy at their origin inevitably acted by default, for lack of any alternative. And the alternative these enemies of

Jesus did not accept is mentioned at the beginning; it is the love for Jesus that would open up their hearts and minds. And so the invisible drama of what ascendency to adopt, what generating mediation to invoke, was decided for the worst, and hostility to Jesus began to grow. The devil acts in any and every event, since it is his business to be a spirit of negation and deny mankind any and all positive freedom of action and choice. At this point we can consider the episode where Jesus drives the moneychangers from the Temple.

The pericope itself is recorded rather sparingly in the synoptics, apart from Mark where we find such details as the ban on carrying cultual vessels connected with sacrifice "through the Temple" (11:16),[76] and apart from the broader sequence in which it is inserted in all three synoptics, according to a process of division and distribution for which we shall need to find the reason. John gives us the fullest version, but if we take away the probable glosses and additions made by the evangelist, we are left with little more than the bare essentials, though also his tradition is here revealed to be different from the synoptic tradition.[77] This essentiality and these certain details, which the different traditions involved had no evident reason to invent, suggest the episode is of a very early date; and the fact that the event as a whole is historical is clear from its compatibility with other teachings of Jesus and from the impetuous, aggressive image of him that it presents. There is nothing gently persuasive about this combative figure, burning the bridges behind him as he heads for a final showdown. In the synoptics the episode takes place on the eve of the Crucifixion, and this position is to be preferred.[78]

The version in the fourth Gospel is, however, more detailed and strategically placed to start off Jesus's ministry in a really sensational way, only a few days after the help he gave at Cana that was still halfway between a private affair and public display. The setting for this scene must be the first courtyard of the Temple complex, the Court of the Gentiles, which was open to all and used for commercial business:

> The Jewish Passover was at hand, and Jesus went up [*anebe*] to Jerusalem.
>
> And found in the Temple [*hiero*] the sellers of oxen, sheep, and doves, and the moneychangers busily at work. And when he had made a scourge of cords [*phragellion ek schoinion*], he drove [*exebalen*] them all out of the Temple [*hierou*], with the sheep and the oxen, and poured the changers' money on the ground and overturned the tables, and said to the sellers

> of doves: "Take these things away [*arate*] from here, and do not turn my Father's house [*oikon*] into an emporium [*oikon emporiou*]." And his disciples remembered [*emnesthesan*] that it was written: "The zeal [*zelos*] for your house will eat me up."[79]
>
> The Jews then replied, asking him: "What sign can you show us for doing these things?" And Jesus answered them, saying: "Destroy this sanctuary [*naos*] and in three days I will raise it up [*egero*]." The Jews then said: "It took forty-six years to build this sanctuary [*naos*], and you will put it up in three days?" But he [*ekeinos*] was speaking about the sanctuary [*naou*] of his body. When, therefore, he had risen [*egerthe*] from the dead, his disciples remembered [*emnesthesan*] what he had said, and believed the scripture, and the word [*logo*] spoken by Jesus. (2:13–22)

The first sentence functions as a symbolic introduction; with the approach of Passover Jesus goes up to the holy city: the unnecessary specification "the Jewish Passover" possibly conveys a negative connotation alluding to the Christian Easter,[80] and my further suggestion is that the verb of upward movement (*anabainein*) might prefigure the ascent to the cross and the Resurrection.[81] Two sequences follow: the driving out, followed by a commentary on it in the form of a dialogue. The first sequence is similar to the synoptic version but differs at three points. The first is the addition of the "scourge of cords" that Jesus assembles on the spot, presumably amid general indifference in such a crowded place, and then suddenly wields to drive out the sellers. It is an odd piece of handiwork intended for immediate, violent use and appears so incongruous in respect to the idealized images we have made of the Son of God that it can be judged to be historical. The second difference is the mention of sheep and oxen, large and expensive sacrificial animals, while the doves were meant for the poor; and it is no accident that Jesus treats the dove sellers more mildly and gives them an explanation for his action. The third is the inclusion of a different explanatory passage taken from Psalms, which is to be considered as a citation *ad sensum,* where the single passage stands for the text as a whole but with particular emphasis on the words explicitly quoted.

The detail of the scourge (φραγέλλιον; Latin *flagellum*) could be historical according to the criterion of dissimilarity, as I already said, and the reasoning appears even more well founded since the insertion of the expression

*phragellion ek schoinion* does not depend on a symbolic link introduced by the evangelist to the flagellation during the Passion: a different word is used there (in 19:1 we find the verb *emastigosen*).[82] It is a different matter with the large sacrificial animals: apparently sheep and oxen were not sold in the Court of the Gentiles, so this seems to be a case of *amplificatio,*[83] and here Dodd's suggestion is of some help that the introduction of these animals might be triggered by this very detail, considering that the *phragellion ek schoinion* was "often used of a whip for driving cattle."[84] This use of emphasis is not unusual in John (we have just met it in the exceptional capacity of the vessels at Cana), and leaving aside for the moment the not negligible question of the historicity of Jesus's *phragellion,* it is an important signal for us to reflect on the impact of Jesus's action on sacrifice as a whole, enacting the theological argument later developed in Hebrews that Christ's sacrifice overcame the Temple sacrifices. The method of *amplificatio* might even explain Jesus's violence against the Temple traders (who also feel the sting of his scourge), and yet this feature, strengthened by the unexpected touch of the scourge and conflicting with more spiritualized Christological images,[85] suggests an interpretation of historical fact where the writer's narrative procedure actually transmits an authentic Jesuan attitude. The Old Testament quotation (Ps 69:9) was added later by way of explanation, as the evangelist himself makes clear when he attributes the comment from scripture to the disciples, whereas the synoptics have Jesus quote a different passage from the Old Testament. And the author's metacomment inserted into the account, with its repeated references to the disciples' remembering, is a mark of historical reliability.

The Johannine version, then, disregarding its place in the narrative, shows appreciable signs of historicity in the first sequence, while the Marcan version transmits further elements that are probably historical. The fourth evangelist builds a notable theological climax with a sequence of three terms: ἱερόν (the Temple complex)–οἶκος (the house of the Father)–ναός (specifically, the sanctuary, the most sacred part). When pronounced by Jesus, the last of these terms stands for the fulfillment in his person of the innermost sacredness of the Temple, while in the mouths of his opponents it remains a synecdoche for the building as a whole. The second part exploits the ambivalence of the word *naos* to the full and shows greater development in its Christological language but transmits elements in its two key phrases that

must be considered historical. The first is the question put to Jesus by the Judaic leaders, echoed by similar phrases in the synoptics, shifted elsewhere but still bearing some relationship to this Temple episode (Mk 11:28: "By what authority do you do these things? etc."—Mt 21:23–27; Lk 20:1–8). The second phrase is a *logion* about the destruction and reconstruction of the Temple/sanctuary that appears in Mark and Matthew as the chief charge made against Jesus (Mk 14:58; Mt 26:61), and finally as a derisive remark during the Crucifixion (Mk 15:29; Mt 27:40), still with ambivalence in the meaning of *naos;* Luke, on the other hand, shows greater textual reserve and holds the saying back until Acts 6:14, during the proceedings against the protomartyr Stephen, accused of bringing back the incriminated Jesuan *logion,* referred to periphrastically as "the holy place" (*tou topou tou hagiou*—6:13).

The saying about the destruction/reconstruction of the Temple/sanctuary must be accounted authentic because of its intra-Judaic tenor and the editorial difficulties it posed, besides answering the criterion of multiple attestation;[86] and it transmits an apocalyptic prediction made by Jesus, who probably had in mind the replacement of the Temple by the eschatological advent of the Kingdom. However, it seems strange that the *logion* has not been linked to Jesus's subversive action in the Temple itself, the more so since it is nowhere to be found in the synoptics, with Luke actually shifting it to the Acts. This contrasts with the charges made against Jesus that can be traced to a provocative saying surely known to all who had anything to do with the Temple institution, for the obvious reason that it was said there. Everything therefore points to the *logion* being spoken in the Temple on the occasion of the performative prophecy of driving out the traders and moneychangers, preceded by the question about authority that the synoptics shift elsewhere, giving us instead an earlier version (the "sign" requested by the Jews sounds very John-like) while maintaining a looser but recognizable connection with the Temple episode.

We may conclude that the version in John is superior, both in its overall presentation of the episode and also in the likely authenticity of the final exchange, the sign requested by the Jews and Jesus's prophecy of destroying the sanctuary. In the synoptics, on the other hand, the pericope appears incomplete and indirectly developed as one pericope follows close on the heels of another (in Mark, followed with variations or cuts by the other two synoptics: the withered fig tree encapsulating the expulsion of the merchants,

the question about authority, and after the introductory parable of the two sons and the parable of the murderous vine growers),[87] while the phrase about the construction/destruction of the Temple has been cut. It is possible to uncover the reason why the version in John is more complete. The synoptics, beginning with Mark, were put in a difficult position by a prophecy that appeared in some way to be only part-fulfilled, in its *pars destruens,* while the eschatological advent of the Kingdom was still to come (a further sign that this was the original form of the *logion*). This accounts for the vacillation apparent in Mark when charges are first being formulated against Jesus; at this point the author introduces a distinction, for the benefit of his public, between the "sanctuary" (*naon*) destined for destruction since it is "made by the hands of men" (*cheiropoieton*) and the sanctuary to be rebuilt, "not made by the hands of men" (*acheiropoieton*—Mk 14:58).[88] The immediate significance of this sanctuary not made with the hands of man has been identified by scholars, using acceptable arguments, with the community of believers in Christ, in the church.[89] However, the phrase, rather than disposing of the fact that the final Kingdom promised by Christ was not yet rebuilt as the eschatological sanctuary of the last days, draws our attention to it. The fourth evangelist reorganized this prophetic-figural-performative complex in line with his eschatology, fulfilled here and now in Jesus, and as a consequence he discovered the key to its interpretation in the Resurrection, which allowed him to leave all the pieces of the Temple puzzle in place: the *pars construens* is Christ himself, and the climax was orchestrated by putting the verb in the quotation from the Psalms into the future tense and phrasing the act of destroying the Temple in the second person plural. Any suggestion of something indefinite in the future vanished because it was fully proclaimed and present in Jesus; instead, the enemies of Christ were to find their reason for his arrest in the raising of Lazarus, toward the end of the Book of Signs.

The impression is that the synoptics and the fourth Gospel rely on two similar traditions where there are certain divergent elements, accentuated by editing and, in the synoptics, by cuts and displacement. In both versions Jesus's attack arouses the hostility of the priestly leadership; in the synoptics this is manifested immediately, while in John, where the attack is not placed near the Passion, there is only mention of Jesus's doubts about many who believed in him when they saw his signs because he knew "what there was in man" (2:25). What follows in the narrative justifies the diffidence on the part

of the Son of man; his preaching breeds growing hostility and leads to the attempted stoning that crowns his attack on the devil as a "murderer from the beginning," a crescendo that allows us to see Jesus's physical exit from the Temple as his symbolic departure: "Then they picked up stones to throw [*balosin*] at him. But Jesus hid and went out of the Temple" (8:59).

We can appreciate the use of the verb *ballo,* which would seem to resume the action of driving out (*ekballein*) the merchants in 2:15 and helps us to visualize Jesus as he leaves behind human sacrificial *sym-bola* (from *symballein*, a verb indicating both the group hostility and a uniting around one point), passing through their midst, exactly as in the sanctuary in Jerusalem. How that was possible had been made clear earlier by the driving out of the traders from the Temple, preceded by the Christic-Dionysian metamorphosis of water into wine. In Jesus's action in John it is as if all human symbolism rises anew through driving out the degrading violence surrounding its origins; and yet that symbolic action becomes deceptive, and fails to interact with the *symbolon* to which it compares itself, if we look no further than its surface and fail to master its secret dialectic of opposition/appropriation. How far this path will take us can be discovered by an examination of the text and context of the Temple episode in John, carried out in close dialogue with the synoptic versions.

There would appear to be no connection between the pericope in the fourth Gospel and the Cainite origin of the Second Temple, or the preexilic Temple with its roots in hierogamy and infanticide, but appearances can be deceptive. To start with, there is the theological-historical significance of the opening sentence of the pericope, alluding to the sacrificial rite of the Passover, on the eve of which Jesus "goes up" to Jerusalem. He goes to confront the whole machinery of sacrifice, not because of some purist objection to sacrifice but because he is ready to take it over and make it into a means of effective, definitive mediation: the inner logic of the episode, apart from being a conscious and free choice, is no different from the sacrifices we have seen in archaic and classical Greece, and naturally within the intermedial parameters of ancient societies. Here we can fully appreciate the objectivity of John's theological-narrative method, and the semantic side-effect of his respect for the original materials of his sources. Again, the lack of verbal parallelisms with the *phragellion* in the very short Johannine account of the scourging of Jesus gives us the right path to follow, given that the evangelist exhibits

elsewhere a fondness for parallelism. It is a clear indication not only that the expression comes from the source, but that its use is intentional, letting the analogy between the two episodes of scourging emerge from the facts and avoiding any insistence on crude details, since John wants the reader to catch the theological point. In this objective and deep sense the scourge of cords, made by Jesus to drive out the intruders who had turned the house of the Father into a marketplace in order to supply the Temple's sacrificial industry, shows some correspondence to the *flagellum* that the Roman soldiers would use to torture him.[90] But why attack the merchants in particular? That question brings us to the hermeneutic starting point of the story as it is variously retold in the Gospels.

Driving out ordinary working folk who made their living from the Temple trade is a synecdoche with which Jesus sends out a performative, prophetic message to show the unworthiness of the priesthood in power that had grown rich and prosperous through that trade.[91] This is evident from the Old Testament context that the actors in this scene and the evangelists refer to: the prophecy in Isaiah of the overthrow of Tyre, where the city's merchants are defined as princes and its traders as powerful in this world (23:8).[92] There is a further reference to this passage in Revelation where it speaks of the "merchants of the earth" (18:3 and 11), who are the "great men of the earth" (*hoi megistanes tes ges*—18:23), most probably alluding to Jerusalem.[93] Thus the merchants in both the Old and the New Testament indicate a selfish, avaricious governing class, and the Gospels tell us that they had installed themselves at the heart of Israel's religious life.

Yet another hypotext is active in the synoptic Gospels and John: it is the prophecy at the end of the book of Zechariah, the biblical palimpsest that shows the clearest efforts to overcome the trauma of the murders of Zerubbabel and his high priest Zechariah, efforts evident in the parts concerning the chief plotter, Joshua, which are both reticent and obvious in that they represent him as guilty of an unspecified but serious crime, though divine forgiveness of that crime is essential if the Yahwistic cult is to be successfully reestablished at Jerusalem (Zc 3:1–7).[94] The final verse of the book attributed to Zechariah, though little of the original core of oracles remains, reads as follows: "And in that day there shall be no more Canaanites [= merchants] in the house of the Lord of hosts" (14:21). Different versions of the text give the readings "Canaanites" and "merchants," leaving commentators hesitating

between the two,[95] but the solution to the problem is to be found if we remember that the same prophetic book talks about the fall of Tyre, a city proverbial for its commerce (Zc 9:2–4), and if we also probe the scriptural parallels. In the Pentateuch, the Canaanites correspond to the previous inhabitants of the Promised Land (Lv 18:3 et seq.) and are condemned for their "abominable" customs (18:27), concerned with their sexual habits and child sacrifices to Moloch (18:21). This scriptural hypotext plainly alludes to the hierogamic and sacrificial rituals performed in the archaic Temple, with the murder of the legitimate Davidic king as a continuation of the same. This is the commerce that makes the Canaanites notorious in the Bible. It attaches to them as characteristic and justifies the wavering between an ethnonym and a commercial denomination that we find in the various editions and translations of the Hebrew Bible.[96] The Canaanites represent the Jews at a stage when the Yahwistic cult was still pagan, and consequently they allude to what the class running the Temple was *not* supposed to be, marking a compromise reached by the conspiring priests with other priests who disapproved of the plot and called for the house of God to be consecrated in a manner worthy of the name. From that moment on there ought to have been no more merchants in the Temple but exactly that was still the case in Jesus's day, and in John roused the Son of man to act at the very start of his mission of salvation.

The hypotext of Zechariah underlies all the fourth Gospel, and moreover provided interpretive inspiration for the theological elaboration of the Passion. This scriptural strategy, grounded in anti-Temple feeling, supports a hypothesis that has already been mentioned but not sufficiently warranted—the idea that the Beloved Disciple was a priest who knew all about the functioning and layout of the Temple, as we can deduce from the credibility of many details, and was even better acquainted with its bloody background history. The most revealing verse is John 19:37, where Jesus is openly identified with Zerubbabel by quoting the most stirring passage in Zechariah, not taken from the Septuagint but from a Greek translation close to the original Hebrew text: "and they shall look upon him whom they have pierced" (Zc 12:10),[97] where the typological reference is to Saul who was also killed with a spear, a symbol of royal power.[98]

The quotation also acts as a comment on another moment dense with theological and figural meaning, the moment just after the death of Jesus

when his side is pierced by a soldier's spear and blood and water come out, and in that order. The detail aims to be physically realistic, albeit according to ancient notions, and has its figural sense in the living water that pours from Christ and in the blood that was its price and how it was paid; this reverses the order followed at Cana, and so creates a possible chiasmus "water : blood = blood : water," where the blood would be the heart of Christ's redemption in its dual aspect of the Eucharistic wine and the Passion, and the water the spiritual frame of purification by baptism and a state of final salvation that, at this point, can only refer to the Resurrection (and thus we would have the chiasmus "baptism : Eucharist = Passion : Resurrection"). The allusion to resurrection helps us to understand why the evangelist makes a point of the fact that it is an eyewitness account, and so can be trusted (19:35).

At the same time, Zechariah supplies the hypotext we need to complete the driving out of the traffickers from the Temple, while many earlier passages add force to it: the rivers of living water flowing from Jesus in 7:37–38 (from Zc 14:8), the ass on which Jesus enters Jerusalem in 12:15 (from Zc 9:9), and the image in 16:32 of sheep that are scattered because their shepherd has been struck down (from Zc 13:7),[99] prepared by chapter 10 (Zc 11). The underlying aim of Deutero-Zechariah is to achieve peace in Jerusalem and to establish a cult untainted by violence and the lust for power: "And I will pour open the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of compassion, and they shall look upon him whom they have pierced" (Zc 12:10), and that phrase is the last quotation from Zechariah in the fourth Gospel (19:37). It must carry the same meaning here, too: the sacrifice accepted by Christ is glorious not only because it was crowned by the Resurrection but because it is a sign of reconciliation and forgiveness. In fact, we can say that the Resurrection corresponds to this moral and ontological redemption, and that this is the Glory of the one who has been pierced, and so fulfills the *figurae* of Saul, Zerubbabel, and the Suffering Servant. It should be noted that the synoptic theme of the son of David, which we might expect to find in John as well, is in fact missing, not because it was irrelevant or the evangelist ignorant of it (7:41–42),[100] but because he wanted no part in a Messianic debate that was historically misleading and a thing of the past as far as he was concerned since he now derived his perspective from preexisting Christology.

The reaction of the Jews was not slow in coming, though to all appearances they were not particularly surprised, either because the sanctuary continually

provoked fierce opposition from various Judaic factions or because they were accustomed to prophetic attacks in a performative style. Their response, following a Jewish dialectic procedure also used by Jesus, consisted in a counterquestion, aiming to find out the divine sign on the basis of which this unknown prophet felt himself authorized to act as he did. The irony, typical of John, is that these men of the world had no idea, no more than Pilate was to have, that the "sign" they required was there, ostensively, right before them. The dialogue, theologically orientated and hinging on the *logion* of Christ transformed into a crypto-resurrectional reply, displays the skillful writing of the evangelist; but it is set out in this way to bring out the testimonial core of Christ's mission, his willingness to take the place of all the animal victims sacrificed every day in the Temple, and of all the human victims immolated before animal sacrifice replaced and concealed them. The gospel narrative puts in dramatic form what the Epistle to the Hebrews argues with a theological synopsis.

The driving out of the merchants from the Temple is equivalent to a sacrificial substitution and realizes through designedly aggressive and ostensive action what the sign at Cana had just realized in a metamorphic, oblational version; the two events thus come to form an indivisible, underlying diptych that the Passion was to make explicit, uniting their separate moments. Jesus in John, and in the synoptics, acknowledges the Temple as the "house" of the Father that sent him, and therefore does not reject the Judaic history to which it belongs; except that this house, this *oikos,* is not a theological, divinely family-like refuge but rather a transcendent center of relationships that reveal their truth by being realized historically. What these relationships are can be understood from the scriptural gloss identified by the Johannine community, Psalm 69, a classic imprecatory psalm.

In Psalm 69 the psalmist calls on God from a wasteland of abandonment and persecution, and the same psalm reappears at a solemn moment in John, in the great discourse leading up to the Passion and occupying the space of the Last Supper by itself: "They hated me without a cause [*dorean*]" (15:25), where the adverb δωρεάν, meaning "gratis, gratuitously," evidences the absence of any valid reason for the hatred directed against Jesus, but it also expresses the ironic reversal of the selfish grasping ways of those running the Temple. The complete verse of the psalm quoted in the pericope of the cleansing of the Temple is "Because the zeal for your house eats me up;

and the reproaches of those that reproach you have fallen on me." It now becomes clear that the verb inflected in the future tense by the evangelist ("The zeal [*zelos*] for your house will eat me up") designates Christ's Passion, with a scriptural ellipticity fraught with allusions to the Judaic history and the final overturning accomplished by the only real priest, celebrating the last sacrifice in the Temple of his own body. And there could be a further cunning allusion.

Mentioning zeal for the house of God is, in my opinion, no accidental reminder of the category of religious zeal in a place that was the object of claims by the Zealots, priests, and doctors of the Law who sought to preserve the purity of the Temple cult from the threat of paganism, and who should not be confused with the Sicarii, a partisan group that fought an eschatological war against Rome and triggered the conflict of 66–70 AD.[101] These intra-Judaic elements have led commentators to confuse Jesus's action with the positions of these religious and political nationalists, or vice versa to distinguish it from them in an abstract way, whereas better historical contextualization more plausibly suggests direct confrontation, something that the evangelists glide over to avoid calling up dangerous associations but that they nevertheless transmit in encoded language. Thus we can recover the subtly polemical nexus condensing into Jesus's action, the overthrow of all the politico-religious positions centering on the Temple: the only true zealot in the house of the Father is the Son, and the Zealots who thought they could restore its cult through a logic of fanatical opposition (they believed, for example, in circumcision through force[102]) are just so many wretched, selfish merchants. To sum up, for the evangelist the religious situation in the Temple-house of the Father was so disastrous that even the politically and economically uncorrupted had fallen away and lost the sense of its real significance. Indeed their betrayal was the most insidious because they were convinced of their pureness. As he saw it, it was this religious category of the ζῆλος that outraged the prophetic psalmist in the quotation, in a similar way to the overzealous friends of divine justice in the book of Job. The zeal for love by which the Son of God is eaten up will lead him to be eaten up by the zeal for hatred of the same merchants, the same fanatics who will cause the material destruction of the Temple in 70 AD; and the central event of the destruction/resurrection of the Temple of his body is the only interpretive key of past and future events, representing in itself the only salvific

alternative to the material and spiritual destruction of the Judaic nation. After deciphering this encrypted passage, we can appreciate the theological implications of utilizing the psalm in John. It is difficult to say more with fewer words.

Zeal for the real house of the Father attracts the gratuitous hatred of those who use the house as a marketplace or as a pretext for violent fanaticism, and this entails the prophetic, biblical stance taken by those who are made the target of incomprehension and persecution by characters of that sort, for they are left with no human resting place and are immediately vulnerable in their persons and their lives.[103] The position of the prophet Zechariah, of King Zerubbabel, and of the Suffering Servant who condenses both, is God's position, invoked by all these *figurae Christi,* and this connection among them is the invisible house in which they all dwell, a sanctuary that, in John, becomes the victorious pierced body of Christ. Putting the verb in the quotation from the psalm into the future tense introduces a new tension between the past, from which the Temple with its religious and economic trading comes, and the future Jesus represents, in the literal sense that he renders it already present in himself, bringing it into the present by making the *logion* about the reconstruction of his body-sanctuary the first declaration of the fourth Gospel's fulfilled eschatology.

Already, in the prophets, Job, and Psalms, the persecution of God, unheeded and misunderstood, and the persecution of those who speak in his name are a single action; and Jesus in the fourth Gospel shows this complete convergence between God and the word of God in his own person, showing us the germ of Christological transitivity, of the Christogenesis that was the real impulse behind Christology. The Gospel tells us that the *Logos* was with God and was God since that had been its position from the beginning, the position of someone who is all one with the Father because he gives all to the Father and is therefore one and the same with him. This constant self-sacrifice is the very dynamism of creation as John understands it, of the Son's indwelling in the Father, and if we pursue the parallel with the unwritten teaching of Plato, it introduces the indeterminate Dyad of the manifold into the divine One, transforming it, however, into a constant *reductio ad unum,* through the unifying will of a love that gives up everything to prevent this multiplicity from becoming a barrier concealing God and making his creational plan of love unintelligible.

The hypotext of the synoptic version also relates to a similar operation, not as advanced as the distinct course traced in John but no less revealing, with an interweaving of prophetic texts for which Zechariah gives us the motivation and the background. The prophetic infratext of the parallel episodes in the synoptics (Is 56:7 + Jer 7:11) reveals the editorial Marcan hand in its composite nature, followed by the other two evangelists. It combines a passage from Isaiah about the house of God meant for all peoples with a syntagma from Jeremiah describing what the Temple had become: "but you have made it a den of brigands [*spelaion leston*]" (Mt 21:13; Mk 11:17; Lk 19:46). Translating *lestes* with a generic word like "thief" is inadequate, not only because it falls short of the word's more forceful meaning but also because at the time of the evangelists it denoted the Sicarii, those enemies of Roman dominion who mainly caused the catastrophe of the first Judaic war.[104] Also Mark's word therefore connotes rejection of the religious fanaticism responsible for the spiritual and material destruction of the Temple. The infratext from Jeremiah contains supporting allusions as to the original nature of the Temple cult and the savagery of its history. It needs to be read in the version used by the evangelists, the Septuagint, since it differs from the Hebrew text at some points, conspicuously in the case of Jeremiah, reflecting a textual tradition that is to be preferred here as in other cases, such as the present passage. Here is a translation of the longer Greek text:[105]

> if you murder [*phoneuete*], commit adultery, steal, perjure yourselves, and make sacrifice [*ethymiate*][106] to Baal, and for your misfortune go after strange gods that you do not know, and besides that, come and stand before me in this house where my name is invoked, and say: "We have abstained from doing all these abominations," I shall say to you: "Is this house, in which my name is invoked in your presence, a den of brigands [*spelaion leston ho oikos*]?" (7:9–10)[107]

Compared to the Masoretic text, the Greek version puts the act of killing in the forefront, and this emphasized the sacrifices to Baal, which were particularly embarrassing in the context of Jerusalem since they were linked to the ancient human sacrifices made to Yahweh-Moloch. A reference here to the *molk* is no longer a matter of conjecture, especially if we consider the strategic use of Zechariah. Its presence as an infratext in the synoptics is less

impressive but no less precise: besides the entry of the Messiah into Jerusalem on an ass, we find Matthew 26:15 deriving the idea of thirty pieces of silver from Zechariah 11:12 (a development of the greedy merchants theme), while Mark 14:27 already has the theme of the shepherd who is struck down, from Zechariah 13:7. This relative paucity of quotations from Zechariah is, however, offset in Matthew and Luke when Jesus explicitly accuses the Judaic leadership with having spilled all the blood of the righteous from Abel to Zechariah, the priest-prophet of the legitimate Davidic king, Zerubbabel (Mt 23:35–36; Lk 11:50–51). The accusation is so strikingly apt that it suggests the tantalizing possibility of its having been the key phrase in the original episode of the driving out of the merchants.

But such a literal correspondence is not strictly necessary since, in the synoptics, the charge follows closely on the already mentioned larger sequence into which a shortened version of the Temple cleansing was inserted. The biographical and topographical detail surrounding the killing of the prophet is remarkably accurate, proving just how tenaciously the memory was preserved, while the phrasing is so incisive that it probably goes back to Jesus himself. The Matthean version is bluntly explicit and uses the most forceful of the verbs catalogued in Jeremiah in the Septuagint version: "until the blood of Zechariah son of Barachias whom you slew [*ephoneusate*] between the sanctuary [*metaxy tou naou*] and the altar of the sacrifices [*thysiasteriou*]" (23:35). Luke tends to be more decorous, and the verb he uses to describe the killing is not so strong; on the other hand, he gives us a synonym for the inner sanctum of the Temple that anticipates the *oikos* in the quotation from Isaiah: "until the blood of Zechariah son of Barachias who perished [*apolomenou*] between the altar of the sacrifices and the dwelling <of God> [*metaxy tou thysiasteriou kai tou oikou*]" (11:51). This precise topographical detail not only documents a desperate but unsuccessful attempt to escape, if not a last-ditch attempt to seek refuge on the altar itself, which was the supplicant's final resort in the ancient world (as in Euripides's *Andromache*), but also contains another crypto-quotation, so far missed by commentators as they skip these tragedies that lie concealed and at the same time stubbornly preserved within Judaism.

The crypto-quotation refers to the inauguration of the Temple by Solomon in 1 Kings and occurs in all four Gospels, with two supplementary passages, one in the synoptic tradition and one in John. I will start with the

last of these, since it appears first in the narrative in 1 Kings. The germ of the Christological development in John can be recognized in the words recorded by Solomon, son of David, as spoken by Yahweh to his father concerning the building of his "house." In the Septuagint version: "you shall not build the house [*ouk oikodomeseis ton oikon*], but the son that shall come out from your loins: he shall build the house [*oikodomesei ton oikon*] in my name" (1 Kings = 3 Kings 8:19). The hypertextual meaning in John, which is echoed by the reconstructed conclusion of Psalm 69, is that the final, decisive descendent issuing from the loins of David is Jesus, endowed with the task of building God's definitive *oikos* in himself. But the second passage is even more impressive and is recognizable in what Matthew and Luke have to say about the killing of the righteous.

The details of the killing of Zechariah conceal the hypotextual stratum that Matthew and Luke, probably following Jesus, had in mind. This refers to the animals sacrificed at the inauguration of the Temple, a wildly exaggerated figure of 22,000 oxen and 120,000 sheep. Given the impossibility of performing such an astronomical sacrifice at the altar, it had to be shifted to a place in the courtyard that should sound familiar: "The same day the king consecrated the middle [*to meson*] of the court, which was in front of the house [*oikou* = sanctuary] of the Lord, because he made burnt offerings and sacrifices there" (1 Kings = 2 Kings 8:64). Figurally, this is the same spot where Zechariah was killed, according to the synoptics, which suggests the author of 1 Kings included this topographical detail as a reminder of what had been done there, with the sacrificial hyperbole to underline its seriousness. Confirmation of a link between the Temple court and the murder of Zechariah comes from a symmetrical episode in 2 Chronicles 24:20–22, in which one Zechariah son of the priest Jehoida, is stoned in the court of the Temple by order of King Joash for preaching against the umpteenth lapse into paganism. This patently unhistorical episode is an encrypted variation on the theme of the Zechariah of Zerubbabel,[108] which is further proved by the character's final words calling for his murder to be accounted for before God. This textual network makes it likely that the sacrificial hyperbole of 1 Kings 8:64 alludes to the only Zechariah murdered in the court of the Temple and means to express the need for an absolutely exceptional sacrifice, *extra ordinem,* outside the normal order of things, to cleanse Judaism's central place of worship. And that is precisely what the son of David accomplished

in Christianity, becoming the *metaxy,* the *meson* that was able to mediate by taking the place of Zechariah and his king.

But this scriptural background enables us to understand also the strange prohibition of transporting the cultual vessels "through the Temple," that is, through the courts of the building to the Court of Gentiles, in Mark 11:16. The meaning of this authentic prophetic sign now appears unequivocally: a suspension of the Temple sacrificial cult.[109] However, it is not a generic act, a kind of theological allusion in the abstract style of modern theologians, but a fitting, incandescent allusion. The symbolic prohibition is enjoined in memory of the assassination of the Davidic king and his prophet. Particularly impressive is the juxtaposition of the cultic vessels carried through the Court of Gentiles and Zechariah's attempt to flee from that very spot "between the sanctuary and the altar of the sacrifices" (Mt 23:35). It is as if the vessels repeated the same desperate run in a hidden, intolerable fashion. The Marcan Jesus wants to stop them once and for all and seems to concentrate in his religious injunction on the dramatic phrase of Matthew and Luke about killing the prophets, for reasons we still have to finish examining.

In any case, it is clear that both traditions, synoptic and Johannine, include the expelling of the "brigands" from the Temple in the same interpretive progression; in the synoptics, its place is just before the Passion in order to highlight the final break with the Judaic leadership and the inevitability of this final reckoning in a competition as old as postexilic Judaism itself; the fourth Gospel, on the other hand, with its solemnly declarative and yet densely allusive theology, puts the reckoning at the start of Jesus's mission, after the performative announcement done through signs at Cana.

The diptych formed by the marriage at Cana and the cleansing of the Temple illustrates the motives, already evident in the first of these episodes, that led to all-out confrontation with the entire history of Judaism and with the hidden archaisms of the Yahwistic cult. All of that had to be brought back to the authentic cult proposed by the Son of man by presenting himself as the only authentic bridegroom for the nation of Israel symbolized by the figure of his mother, and by testifying to his role by changing the water, with which his coreligionists sought in vain to purify themselves, into the Christo-Dionysian blood that could transform hidden crimes and misdeeds and turn them into an unexpected redemption available to all peoples.

Going back to the marriage at Cana, and to the eschatological-parabolic

register introduced by the nuptial theme, we have still to examine the reasons for the dense interweaving of Judaic and pagan elements that underpins the entire pericope. It is now time to enter in medias res and see how the account in John unfolds as a whole, producing a consistent figural message orchestrated on various levels and covering various areas. That message had to include not only the Judaic elements, with which the evangelist now contended across the board, but also the pagan elements that interacted with them from outside and from within Judaism and attracted the attention of the Johannine community as it progressively drew away from Judaism.

## 6. The New Wine of Cana

The mention of the "six stone jars there for the purifying of the Jews" underlines the fact that the presence of the Christic Bridegroom changed things in respect to the religious situation in Israel, by introducing a qualitatively different marriage that gave a new meaning to the nuptial symbolism. At the start of the Son of man's mission, and following on the Prologue's harsh allusions to the darkness that did not comprehend the light, the differentiation of Jesus from these ritual vessels documents a recent, traumatic separation of the evangelist's community from the Judaic community. This separation was still at an early stage, and as such we must be particularly sensitive and cautious in our interpretation of the transition from the Jewish synagogue to the Christian church. It would be a mistake to assume Jesus's part in this wedding, which represented the Messianic hopes of Israel, to be a kind of addition, a juxtaposition to be taken for granted and changing nothing essential. Equally, and vice versa, it would be wrong to suppose the diversification had already happened and was irreversible. In both cases we would miss not only the real background history but also the theological climax of the episode.

The immediate message is that something essential in the marriage is not functioning properly, seeing that the wine has run out. The fact there is no more wine is a signal, for the evangelist, that the matrimonial union between Israel and its God is no more: neither in the past, because the concealment of the ancient hierogamy had never been really superseded; nor in the future, because there is no real prospect of salvation; nor in the present, because of the resulting religious and ritual void. Naturally, my proposed interpretation

would stand up without the apparent extra weight of all these references, but its adequacy is revealed by the linkage with the Temple pericope, a linkage made more remarkable by the fact that the author has ousted the pericope from its more probable context just prior to the Passion. The episode at Cana therefore anticipates in subdued tones what the driving out of the merchants from the Temple proclaims in dramatic, challenging tones. It gives us a wide range of semantic references, from an assessment of the religious history of Israel and the part Jesus played in it, to a profound reflection on the meaning of his death and resurrection, the breakaway from Judaism of the communities following his teaching, and the relationship to paganism implicit in the miracle's Dionysian connotations. These preliminaries and prospects, in their turn, map out the consequences that would follow the rejection of Jesus's message: first, his crucifixion, anticipated in the symbolism of the wine; and second, the destruction of the Temple, prophetically referred to by driving the merchants from the house of the Father. With this overdetermined, multipurpose interpretive approach we are able to establish that this text transmits a hidden but profoundly meaningful interpretation of the sacrificial dimension of Christ's death. The question of sacrifice could not be avoided, not only because of the surrounding pagan cults but also because sacrifice itself was fundamental to the structure, both visible and concealed, of the Judaic cults. The fourth Gospel shows Jesus determined to give a thorough answer to the sacrificial theme, but, given the realistic context of the marriage at Cana, we can recognize that he must also prevent it from degenerating into a Dionysian debauch of a kind only too familiar to Jews and Gentiles alike. But what wine could achieve all this?

The answer could only come from Jesus, which explains why his mother—and four times in this passage she is referred to by that title—turned to him with confidence consistent with her role. Christ's answer, however, does not simplify matters, seeing that it discloses a problematic strangeness between him and his mother. It can, however, be plausibly explained: the fourth Gospel puts the accent on the transcendent nature of Jesus as the Son of God, as compared to mankind and to human history with its mediatory and religious aspects depending on sacrifice. However, this interpretation remains conventional unless it is connected to the fullness of the divine mediation incarnate in Jesus, outlining a precise and complex relationship with the mediations that came before him, both Judaic and pagan. On the

one hand, the evangelist draws a line marking the watershed between the world of sacrifice before Christ, including both the Judaic and pagan spheres, and the world of salvation introduced by him; on the other hand, his intention is not to mark an insuperable barrier cutting off forever an alien world but to initiate an unexpected relationship, a new dynamic of acquisition.

For starters, the author is not confusing the Judaic religious mediation with the pagan but knows he must start from Judaism, to which he belonged, as did Jesus. And we should not forget that the text of John mentions vessels used for the lustrations of the Jews but says nothing explicitly about pagan rites. The primary comparison is therefore with Judaism, and this has two important repercussions. The first is that the Dionysian symbolism adumbrates, in particular, the orgiastic and more starkly sacrificial elements in Judaism, the lustral water having finally dried up as a result of refusing to admit the religious impurity that made it necessary; the second is that Christ, besides providing the solution to the problem, is also by the same token the filter enabling pagan Dionysianism to be tackled, after dealing with Yahwistic crypto-Dionysianism. This assumes, and the Gospel of John itself confirms it, that the Gospel had pagan readers in mind as well, those pagans interested in what the evangelist could tell them and quick to grasp any religious and ritual allusion to Dionysianism and the associated mystery rites, in accord with a multifaceted symbolic register that could speak to Jews and pagans, and not only to the followers within the community. Here we can detect an element of irony on John's part, with a performative overtone: the unacknowledged violence is destined to be repeated in an aggravated form, and far from weakening Christ's salvation will actually complete its realization. That closes the circle in regard to what was announced in the Prologue and is the final proof of the divinity of Jesus. But it is also the painful history of a religious divorce, anticipated by the sign at Cana, proclaimed by the cleansing of the Temple, and made inevitable in chapter 6 by the failure to understand the sign of feeding the five thousand and the rejection of the Eucharist.

The Jews' withdrawal from the Light, their denial of it, is more serious than the blindness of the pagans, who have not yet lost their chance; and it widens the providential vista to include those in Israel who have decided to follow Christ, among them presumably the evangelist and his community, and pagans ready to join them. This would suggest that the marriage

symbolism of the Cana episode also prefigures an unprecedented alliance between Christic Judaism and converted paganism, a union marking a beginning, on account of its symbolic position in the gospel narrative, as well as an end, a destiny, through the allusion to the Son's "hour" that had yet to come. In John, this copresence of chronological and historical levels is performative and ontological since past and future are already fulfilled in the present dimension, in which the "glory" of the Son is manifested. What we have here is a theological development—strictly worked out within Middle Judaism—analogous to what we find in Paul, where the works of the Law are contrasted strongly to the grace of Christ, and in Hebrews, where Christ's salvation is contrasted to all previous religious schemes, summed up in the bankrupt sacrificial ritualism of the Temple. In all these cases the opposition is not ideologically based—a circumstance ignored by most modern commentators—but expresses a fundamental change of mediatory register, which cancels previous moments if they are maintained in an absolute sense, but actually furthers and completes them if they are set moving again toward objectually effective redemption. And this explains how it is possible for Paul in Romans to declare the Law to be abolished and, at the same time, declare the election of Israel to be irrevocable.

In the marriage at Cana episode, therefore, the initial distinction that the preexisting Christ draws between himself and the woman that bore him sets up no opposition; instead, it renews the theological grounds for a relationship of mediation, otherwise used up and at an end, that finds fulfillment in him. In other words, Christ in John tacitly answers his mother's request by being there, the living incarnation of the Word, the only real answer. The mere participation of Jesus at the wedding ensures the effectiveness of his mediation, and that gives a certain emphasis, very slight but profound, to the figure of Mary as mother of the divine Mediator—mother of God as the tradition would later express it—thereby making herself his human intermediary. This sets off a line of theological thinking that would be codified as Mariology, expressed here in the episode's figural register. Her strategic position confirms that Jesus's mother denotes the most fertile element in Judaism, the creative part that accepted the mediation of the Son, and in that way evidenced its own election, its own force for salvation, and led the way toward the new Israel made up of both Jewish and pagan followers of Christ. In this interpretation, traditional in Mariology and accepted by some

commentators, Mary at the marriage in Cana is seen as symbolizing the people of God and the church.[110] The Son's declaring his difference from her thus becomes enormously significant, an epoch-making religious change that appears as a sign of reconciliation and synthesis.

The honorary form of address, *gynai,* recalls the scene of Mary at the foot of the cross, where her figural solemnity justifies, in embryo at least, the theme of the new or second Eve expounded by Christian writers beginning with Justinus; but it also refers to the Messianic and eschatological developments of the "woman clothed with the sun" in Revelation 12:6 who gives birth to the Messiah and is saved by God from a dragon that corresponds to the serpent tempting Eve in Genesis, as Revelation 12:9 recalls.[111] The book of Revelation, where we find figural symbols coming from Zechariah,[112] testifies to the interaction between John's ideas and the Middle-Judaic apocalyptic writings from which it comes. With John's school the accent falls on the eschatology fulfilled in the present dimension of Christ's manifestation. This distinctive characteristic of the fourth Gospel is not foreign to Revelation either, in which the aim is not so much to predict a series of future events as to provide the faithful with a key to interpret history, starting from the central Christological experience of the "Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" (13:8). This last expression, with deliberate grammatical ambiguity, compresses into a single image the original sin of mankind and the salvation of those whose names have remained written in the book of the Lamb because they have shared his destiny.[113] This original sin can be fully understood if we identify it with the first fratricide committed by Cain and the regicide that inaugurated the Second Temple, which rendered it unworthy of a place in the heavenly Jerusalem and strictly devoid of its sanctuary, the final act in driving the "brigands" from the Temple. Comparison with Revelation shows the figure of the woman and mother as closely connected with Christian eschatology, and also reveals a covert relationship of opposition between the mother of Jesus at Cana and the Temple in the following pericope.

There is, however, something mysterious about the phrase Jesus addresses to his mother when he says his "hour" is not yet come, a typical signal by which John tells the reader to pay special attention. Jesus, through being there, is beginning his mission, and so his hour is at the same time coming, indeed it has already inchoately come: his words also undoubtedly refer to

his coming out into the open as the divine Mediator sent to Israel.[114] But we have still to give a more complete explanation of why he speaks in negative terms. There is an exegetical tradition going back to the Church Fathers, and revived by some Catholic commentators, that solves the problem by construing the phrase as a rhetorical question implying an affirmative answer. But this attempt to find a convenient short-cut is, as a method, totally ill-suited for approaching the multilayered construction of the fourth Gospel.[115] The most logical choice, if we want to solve the enigma in a way aligned with the evangelist's intentions, is to look closely at the sequence of events. Just as the person of Christ provides the solution to the first part of his response to Mary ("What have I to do with you, woman?"), in the same way the sign about to be happen before our eyes, and introduced by Mary's words, "You are to do whatever he tells you," must be the solution to the second part ("My hour has not yet come").

The "six stone jars" yield further information, not so easy to squeeze out on account of the text's elliptical nature, but the theological meaning is on the whole quite clear: the number six could represent incompleteness, the six days of the Creation without the final day of rest,[116] but what is most striking here is the fact that the jars are empty, since they are to be filled with water. The material they are made of is also relevant: in Judaism stone was a guarantee of ritual purity,[117] and can be associated with the stone of the tablets of the Law, while its heaviness links it to the hearts of men transformed into stone when they turn aside from the truth and come up against the stumbling stone of their *skandalon,*[118] their incomprehension of God's mediation. The six ritual vessels are then filled with water to the very top, ἄνω in Greek, a word that has strong associations in connection with the Passion and Christology. If the emptiness of the jars expresses the inadequacy of Judaic ablutions,[119] the fact that they are refilled with water by order of Jesus adds an essential connotation, reinforced by the theological pregnancy of *ano*: the raw material of the miracle is the living water poured into the petrified vessels of official Judaism by Jesus, linked to the Baptist's proclamation of Jesus and to the dialectical opposition created in this pericope between the baptism of John the Baptist, a lustral rite of penitence in view of the expected end of time, and the arrival of the one on whom the Spirit descends and remains, and "who baptizes in the Holy Spirit" (1:33).

Although baptism was a sacrament Christians would take to themselves,

all allusions to it here are rendered elusive, and characteristically enigmatic, by a procedure that hinders even a Eucharistic reading of the miracle at Cana: baptism itself is not mentioned in the pericope concerning the Baptist's proclamation, the evangelist being unwilling to record a scene showing submission to the Baptizer, which is hardly compatible with his preexisting Christology. At the same time, he preserves the traces relating to baptism as practiced by Jesus and his early followers, which evinces his scrupulous concern not to omit any of the historical material available to him. A similar way of proceeding heightened in regard to the Eucharist reveals a more complex theological and textual strategy that faithfully records the traditions transmitted but proceeds by subtraction since the aim is to make us understand their real significance, their correct relationship to the teaching and person of the Christological Mediator.

This observation has an immediate bearing on a more contextual interpretation of the marriage at Cana. Just as the water filling the jars would seem to have nothing to do with baptism, so the wine it is changed into seems to elude any overdetermination in relation to the Eucharist. And yet, just as omitting any explicit mention of baptism is not inconsistent with its sacramental value but intends it to be firmly attached to baptism in the Holy Spirit, making it all one with the person and works of Jesus Christ, so the primary meaning of wine as symbolizing his mission of salvation coincides with this mission at its inchoative stage and at its culmination, the hour of the glorifying of the Son, his crucifixion and resurrection. The miracle of changing water into wine therefore includes the Eucharistic aspect, and any attempt to exclude it becomes a theological and even textual contradiction.[120]

If the symbolism of this scene is extended over the entire Gospel, the interpretive difficulties dissolve from within and a deeper consistency prevails. To do so also puts us in a position to appreciate a series of slight but revealing touches that we shall meet again, much more pronounced, when we examine the doctrine of the Eucharist in John. Only the humblest actors in the scene, the servants, know about the miraculous metamorphosis, on a par with Jesus's mother in whom humility is also to be recognized, in line with her ancillary function in the episode, though the emphasis is quite different. The fourth evangelist appears unaware of the Marian traditions evident in Matthew (the virginal conception) and Luke (the Annunciation) though there might be a trace of them in the Jews' reply in John 8:41; but all three

share a Marian core while each of them develops it from its own individual perspective.[121] Humility also describes the Son of God in John and touches the very heart of the real significance of his divine manifestation. The same gentle submissiveness shown by the Son when he washes the disciples' feet at the Last Supper brings him to carry out the miraculous transformation in person, and with his own person. This is the good wine that surprises the master of the feast, whose unconscious ignorance finds its figural parallel in the incomprehension of the Judaic leadership.[122] To be noticed is the complete lack of answer: while "Jesus seems to have disappeared from the scene," as Meier remarks, the bridegroom for his part says not a word because his figure secretly overlays the figure of the Son.[123] The unawareness of the master of the feast concentrates with one final ironic detail all the irony that emerges from the passage when set against the background of the entire Gospel and Judaic history as a whole.

The text does not neglect to give us precise indications as to the wine previously regarded as normal: it was the sacrificial drink of all men (*pas anthropos*),[124] and thus drunk by Jews and Gentiles alike, the convivial liquor that devolved in the end into the worst wine, equivalent to Dionysian drunkenness, to the Dionysus-wine poured out in *Bacchae* 284 ("this is one born a god, poured out as a libation to the gods"[125]), and the wine subject to a series of restrictions and bans under Judaism, with the cult concentrated entirely in the Temple but always remaining secretly bound to its ancient roots in the Yahwistic cult. This Dionysian action is recognizable in the more harmless drunkenness that the master of the feast usually took as his signal to serve the bad wine; and here there is a moral touch to be observed, where human behavior degenerates and so paves the way for the worst wine. Therefore, the moment has come for the good wine, for the eschatological wine of Jesus, his accepting to sacrifice himself, not however directly mentioned here since the evangelist wants to present the condensed, figurally symbolic start to the glorious manifestation of the Son. This glory was to raise the Son on high and cannot be separated from his willingness to make the sacrifice that would raise him on the cross. The water changed into wine thus contains an allusion not only to the culminating moment of his "hour" but also to the sacramental aspect that would anticipate and commemorate it, without emphasizing either aspect since we are at the very beginning of Christ's mission. And there is another nuance here that should not be missed.

The miraculous metamorphosis occurs at the exact instant when the water reaches the brim and is drawn off, that is, when it is taken from the jars; and once again, the text is extremely elliptical, precisely because it wants us to think about the details. One senses that the water remains water as long as the jars are being filled and appears as wine when the servants start pouring it out. In view of the declaredly allegorical function of the ritual vessels, this must signify two moments in Jesus's career, chronologically and theologically distinct, but unified: the introduction into Judaism of the Son's living water, corresponding to the announcement of the Father's love sent to save men and not to judge them; and the overflowing of the ritual vessels, when the Son, at the culmination of his task, must turn himself into wine in order to fulfill it because his word and his person have been rejected. Christic and Christian purification are not to be achieved through removing the impurities—of which the blood of Judaic religion was the most serious case—but through accepting them, turning them spiritually into a means of salvation: a conclusive soteriological movement that embraces mankind's entire sacrificial dimension and gathers it into itself, adapting the blood poured out in Judaic and pagan sacrifices to serve its ends. Nor is a liturgical note lacking, since the metamorphic transformation of Christ's sacrifice caused scandal among Jews unwilling to recognize their own religious history, and so it had to take place, or rather be perceptible, outside their ritual vessels, which is what happened when Jesus proclaimed the Eucharist, in chapter 6, and many disciples would not accept his words but left him. However, the passage regarding the water and wine is less controversial than it might seem, seeing that it recognizes the preaching of Jesus as belonging to Judaism, with his living water poured into its ritual jars, while its own vessels contain the water changed into wine, that is to say, it is entrusted with the premises and the theological substance of the miracle performed by Christ. The only difference lies in the fact that the new liquor, which starts by utilizing the most real content of the Judaic ritual vessels, is visible and accessible to all, and the change occurs by passing over the edge, the border, and encompassing the religious dimension of paganism that until then had to be excluded. It is a dramatic story but a providential one as well, and from the superior viewpoint of the Son, it works out as a victorious design for salvation, since the rejection that came about through human darkness would bring the divine light to shine on the world, leading from the blood of Christ's sacrifice to the water of eternal life in his resurrection.

The references to the very close, conflictual relationship with Judaism confirm the carefully controlled use of paleo-Yahwistic and Dionysian symbolism, but their sense is opposite to the violent metamorphoses of the sacrificial cults, which suggests that the inversion of meaning is deliberate. Similar control over sacrificial symbolism is exercised in the various *testimonia* to the instituting of the Eucharist given by Paul, the earliest, and then by the synoptic Gospels. The miracle at Cana therefore provides a pertinent answer to the comparative problem that is concentrated in the sacrament of the Eucharist, in its dual Judaic and pagan guise; and the fourth Gospel develops it with daring originality, convinced it is able to draw the ultimate theological consequences from the teaching and witness of Christ. Jesus's first, covert revelation of himself as wine at the marriage at Cana, containing the sacrament of the Eucharist with a view to the coming of his "hour," is followed by the Temple protest with a crypto-resurrectional declaration at its climax and, in chapter 6, by the failure to understand the meaning of the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand when Jesus says he is the bread "that comes down from heaven" (v. 33). At this point, the Eucharistic and comparative pace speeds up, leading to the conflict in chapter 8 and coming closer to the manifestation of the "entire truth" at the moment of his "hour." Once we are close to the revelation in its fullness, the comparison with pagan cults and culture can come out into the open, and that is what happens in chapter 12.

After the raising of Lazarus and the end of the so-called Book of Signs, some "Greeks" ask to see Jesus. This request is heavy with implications, since it comes to have a direct bearing on the significance and consequences of the mission of the Son of man:[126]

> Jesus answered them, saying: "The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified. Truly, truly, I tell you: if a grain of wheat falls to the ground and does not die, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their own existence [*psychen*][127] shall lose it, and those who hate their existence [*psychen*] in this world shall keep it for eternal life [*zoen aionion*]." (12:23–25)

In the universalist perspective of the fourth Gospel these "Greeks" symbolize the pagan world,[128] and Jesus's reply to them, as recorded by John, draws on

that religious culture, utilizing the sacrificial and mystery symbolism of the grain that dies and is born again.[129] The comparison that was only implicit in the pericope of the marriage at Cana becomes explicit and transparently clear, ahead of the revelatory chiasmus of the scene of Christ pierced by the spear where the water-wine sequence of Cana is reversed to become the wine-water of the Resurrection. The accepted sacrifice of his life is Christ's way of making himself seen, that is, of making himself known to the Greeks and pagans, according to the logic of openness, and not of closure, which is in the nature of the love of the Father; and it makes Jesus, the "only begotten" Son (*monogenes:* 1:14 etc.), willing to obey to the point of crucifixion. We must be careful not to interpret the preexisting Christology in John in a way that is too definitive, and thus intransitive and oppositional, since the final definition of the Son is really the highest point; and having reached that peak, it then becomes possible to descend the other side, recovering what lies below from the opposite direction, repeating the movement down and up, catabasis and anabasis, that is the very dynamic of Christ's mediation. What was at first subject to the devil's perverse mediation, in its twofold acceptation, Judaic and pagan, is transformed and becomes a means of salvation. And the reason John omits the miracles of exorcism that have a central role in the synoptics, especially in Mark, is because the mediation of Christ, his very person, is the only definitive exorcism; his presence alone exposes the devil, "murderer from the beginning," making him serve as a means to his own glorification. It is by reason of this mediatory appropriation that Christ, in his last discourse before the Passion, proclaims himself to be "the true vine," a singular Judaic-Dionysian vine, anticipating the cross on which he is soon to be crucified, which will finally bring the grain to fruition.

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We are still missing something about this impressive symbolism that can be said to start with the marriage at Cana, although it is already implicit in the Prologue, dominated by the Greek philosophical notion of *logos* reutilized theologically. What still eludes us is the overall plan. Why does the fourth Gospel adopt such a subtle strategy to communicate Christ's soteriological and sacramental dynamics, and why is it not more explicit and less problematic in its references? Why is there this bewildering textual strategy of omission, such as we saw quite clearly in relation to baptism and glimpsed

in regard to the Eucharist? If we are to answer these questions, we shall need to tackle the much-debated problem of the fourth Gospel's relationship to the Eucharist and the sacraments. The Eucharistic allusions recognizable in the Cana episode remain a matter of controversy, and become more clearly visible in the episode of the feeding of the five thousand and in the following passage about the bread come down from heaven, though even there we meet textual and exegetic difficulties. But the glaring omission of any reference to the institution of the Eucharist in the account of the Last Supper, substituted for by the episode of the washing of the disciples' feet, appears to mark the end of the Gospel's allusiveness and to leave the reader, that is, the believer in the first instance, high and dry.

This passage therefore calls for a chapter to itself since it takes us to the vital nerve-centers of the fourth Gospel's theological and mediatory thinking, to the heart of this strange, and in certain respects still unknown, religious and textual object.

3.

# The Enigma of the Eucharist in the Fourth Gospel

## 1. Between Ancient Sacrifice and Modern Antisacrifice

In two different ways, sacrifice has proved to be the essential point of reference in our task of comparing ancient and modern mediations, with its massive use in the ancient world and the no less massive ban on its use in the modern world. At the place they meet we find Christianity, which might easily have been pushed toward one extreme or the other, that is, toward the all-encompassing sacrificial dimension of ancient civilizations or, contrariwise, toward the sacrificial Puritanism that characterizes our awareness today; instead, history documents an intermediate or intermedial step that consisted in resignifying sacrifice, and marked a turning point between ancient dependence on sacrifice and modern emancipation from it, a point of perfect balance, as it were, that enables us to realize that just as the modern position has an ethical requirement without which we would lose our identity, the ancient positions recognized a need without which human civilization would have had no identity at all. So we return to the coordinates from which our historical and philosophical journey began.

The German and European debate over *Zivilisation* and *Kultur* indeed proves to be relevant, but without the wavering endeavors to side with *Kultur*

such as we see in Nietzsche and Mann, where it is transfigured Dionysian-like or Germanized after the manner of Richard Wagner. Modern ethicality is helpful, emancipating and egalitarian, both socially and politically, in accordance with the best understanding of *Zivilisation* as clearly perceived by Alexis De Tocqueville, for whom the achievements of democracy expand "together with those of civilization [*civilisation*] and intellectual progress [*lumières*]."[1] In spite of that, Tocqueville was far from being satisfied with his prophecy ("As the past no longer enlightens the future, the mind [*l'esprit*] walks in the dark"[2]), and his reaction was not unjustified. Democratic ethicality lacks the ancient necessity of *Kultur* and so flails in a void, always running the risk of degenerating into unforeseen forms of devastating antiobjectual violence that it thought was a thing of the past. On the other hand, ancient necessity bore in itself the substance of the real struggles fought by humanity to achieve its fragile, limited objectual goals, but to the extent that it failed to access a liberating ethical dimension, it fell back on itself and eventually turned out merciless and blind. This aspect was insufficiently considered by the intellectuals who, not without some grounds, sought to reanimate the suppressed rationale for *Kultur* in Europe.

Some grand, evocative contrasts of light and shade can be drawn from this synopsis, having the truth of questions that cannot be avoided because they accompany us like a disturbing shadow, like those shades once compared to the soul or the double, on which the fate of the person casting the shadow depended. Starting from Nietzsche, in our preface we saw an admirable chiaroscuro effect in Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* and its central scene of the dream of the protagonist Hans Castorp on the beauty of ancient Greece mortgaged to Dionysian sacrifices, a scene where the ancient world is light itself, cruelly but vitally streaked with red, and modernity is darkness, aglitter with collective hysteria and the first global conflagration. In contrast to this type of vision, Nietzschean in origin albeit post-Nietzschean in its moral quest, Girard evolved his chiaroscuro, carrying out a symmetrical operation but in reverse, where antisacrificial, and ultimately modern, Christianity is the only light, and the darkness comes to be all of human history before it. One image is the negative of the other, and both have the fascination of historical and existential dilemmas where a choice has to be made; even as they show the limitations of operations that impoverish or exclude the nuances that are not provided for in their language. The Greek dream of

Thomas Mann fails to take in all the moral and cognitive substance of modern awareness, and he relives it in the novel's ambiguity, finally leading him to the mythical and biblical sources of that awareness, though without enabling him to tie the ends together, to resolve this long process in the superior Goethe-like tension he was looking for; nor did he divine the momentous force of Nietzsche's announcement of the death of God, more Christian in its force than the faith it sought to destroy. Girard's theory, on the contrary, acknowledges the cost in blood of the dream of *Kultur* but fails to see the huge objectual stakes being played for, which were won and lost by human cultures as they evolved and finally disappeared, passing on to other cultures not so much a measurable legacy as the overall, invisible intent ruling their existence.

So the contrast of light and dark—summed up conceptually in the Kantian dyad of phenomenon and noumenon, what is appearing and knowable and what is behind and is only thinkable—is to be pursued until we obtain a more balanced and complete picture, smoothing down and rounding off the clear-cut contours that made it equally recognizable and unrecognizable and stood out so clearly thanks to the one-sided lighting that gave an illusion of clarity to its opposite extremes, to its competing versions. What we actually need to regain are the colors relating to the overpowering vitality of a rich, unpredictable human landscape whose creative/destructive matrix proves to be sacrifice. We must also acknowledge that it is through the medium of Christianity that we gain this perspective, providing we take up the Christian mediation in all its incalculability: in its *dépense* becoming *chance* in the language of Georges Bataille, the ecstatic capacity to reach new horizons of significance by accepting an existential condition of danger and destruction. This freely given, creative incalculability is not confined to showing the torment of the person who experiences it as a bloody, astronomical expense of life, precisely because suffering and death mark a point of no return and to ignore them would amount to falling short phenomenologically of what they are. The greatness of Bataille's intuition lies in its capacity to lock onto the profound hidden force of the Christian mediation, following up on Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God, by identifying, in this irreducible irreversibility, the source of a sovereignty that nothing can harm because, objectively, everything crushes it. This knowledge helps us to see what really belongs to Christianity after the undeniable inspiration it had received from

the Judaic debate and the added momentum from Greek and Roman rationality that gave it universal form, and that is its identifying freely undergone suffering as the source of all mediations, not justifying thereby the suffering of the innocent, but not disowning the resulting salvation either, since the sacrificial mediation itself sides with the innocent and takes charge of them. In that way the Christian mediation in its objectual implications takes its place spontaneously at the center of gravity of all human cultures and avoids being annexed by any denomination since the cause it fights for is the origin itself of all culture, of all human objectuality. All the variations and oppositions in it are unified, not because they are dissolved, but because they combine together and are manifested in the historical phenomenon in its entirety.

That is why it is important to sound out the presence of sacrifice in the founding texts of Christianity, to explore it fully in all its intensity, starting with the text that pushes the spiritual and comparative enquiry further than any other, that has no part in violence and at the same time no illusions about being able to keep itself safe from violence. And yet it is here that the fourth Gospel might be said to abandon us, after the promising announcement at Cana and the solemn proclamation in the Temple court; the sacrament of flesh and blood, central to the sacramental narratives of the synoptic Gospels, is missing from the account of the Last Supper. At the last moment, John appears to evade it. How is this to be explained?

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If we are to deal adequately with the remarkable absence of any mention of the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper, though it is partly anticipated but not compensated by the Eucharistic argument in chapter 6, we must not minimize or limit the fact. For centuries, it is true, the tradition saw nothing contradictory in placing the synoptics and John side by side, which cannot be due simply to fideistic concord and lack of critical spirit, but still more to the fact that before our own time, throughout the long centuries of Christian history, the gospel texts were approached with a performative and experiential attitude not wholly unlike the spirit in which they were first written down. What I mean to say is that it would be antihistorical to assert that there was mass deception for hundreds and hundreds of years, with everyone blind to what modern disillusionment alone was able to draw into the light of day.

However, that in no way alters the fact that the difficulty exists and raises many questions as to the real nature of the text and of its intended readership, the more so as the omission of the Eucharist finds a counterpart in the omission of the lustral baptism of Jesus, which is replaced by the contrast, expressed in the person of John the Baptist, between his baptism "in water" (*en hydati*) and baptism "in the Holy Spirit" (*en pneumati hagio*—1:31–33), the paramount sign of the arrival of the Son of God. The excision of Jesus's baptism is in fact attenuated by the direct presence of this other baptism in the Holy Spirit, corresponding to the baptisms "in the Holy Spirit" in Mark 1:8 and "in the Holy Spirit and fire" in Matthew 3:11 and Luke 3:16, except that the more blatant excision of the Eucharist seems to take it up again and radicalize it. Is the institution of the sacrament implicitly understood and calmly accepted, as many Catholic commentators maintain? Or is it open antisacramentalism, as Bultmann maintained, explaining the Eucharistic parts as additions resulting from an editorial compromise with the other Christian churches?[3] Although this extreme view does not manage to deal with some serious textual objections,[4] it has the advantage of simplifying the question in a sense more compliant with Protestant (and modern) spirituality regarding the sacrament as merely symbolizing Christ's existential sacrifice. Such a spiritual connotation cannot be completely excluded from the original Johannine message—after all Schleiermacher's predilection for the fourth Gospel was not so arbitrary—but how and to what extent? It is worth mentioning the position of a moderate Protestant exegete like Oscar Cullmann, who holds that the fourth Gospel is not so explicit about baptism and Eucharist because it links the sacraments to the overall experience of Jesus's life and salvation, to be relived in the liturgy of the Johannine community.[5] This would be a sound interpretation, if it were able to explain the value the fourth evangelist was reliably giving to the sacraments: the cultic life of the community is used as explanation of the Gospel's sacramental reticence, but what was the precise meaning of this cultic life and why did the evangelist feel himself compelled to express it with reticence? This is equivalent to saying that the sacraments explain the sacraments, and we are left with a subtler form of circular argument.

Furthermore, the mystery of the sacramental doctrine in John brings up the old question of the relationship of the fourth Gospel to the synoptics, because it would seem logically to be a matter of comparison, which would

nullify the idea of an independent tradition. Was there, then, an explicit intent to differentiate from one or more of the synoptic Gospels? Or did the differentiation concern presynoptic traditions in an oral or written phase? And, if we admit the existence of such an intention, did it conceal a polemical aim or, vice versa, a complementary theological inquiry? A host of questions arises, by no means easy to answer, drawing us into a maze of hypotheses that float before our eyes and sway with every passing fashion in exegesis, with every new trend in denomination or school. Here, too, our most profitable course is to start from a phenomenological examination of the message that can be reasonably attributed to the fourth Gospel, in such a way that the single questions resolve and define themselves, sooner or later, when the right occasion presents itself. To begin with, we will look at the fundamental core of the Eucharistic riddle as it appears in the text.

## 2. The Textual Problem

As already with the baptism of Jesus, the Christological movement of thought, the distinctive mark of the fourth Gospel, is where we should look for the explanation as to why the celebration of the Eucharist is left out of John's account of the Last Supper; and considering the importance of the sacrament that Jesus left us as his legacy, our investigations need to be even more accurate and extensive. The sacramental nature of this Christological thought becomes apparent as soon as we grasp its overall sense, but we find it hard to access because we are stubbornly unresponsive to what the text is trying to tell us. Since the dimension is performative, understanding begins when it becomes part of our experience, which is typical of all religious texts, but in Christian texts it occurs with singular intensity in historical and existential terms. However, this observation by itself is still generic since it says nothing about what exactly the author of the Gospel wants us to feel and understand. The difficulty is to identify some aspect of the text and its argument through which we can tune in to the communicative and experiential aims of John's Gospel.

The exegetic literature certainly reveals no lack of explanations more varied and stimulating than the schematic opposition between antisacramentalists and sacramentalists, equally prejudiced in their different ways. Joachim

Jeremias's hypothesis is attractive, suggesting that the remarkable silence in John was a protective measure to safeguard the Eucharist from profanation by those uninitiated in the greatest of Christian mysteries;[6] his starting point is more flexible and credible hermeneutically speaking, his assumption being that the omission is not due to a slight importance given to the Eucharistic supper but to its centrality, such that it had to be preserved from any misunderstanding.[7] We are, however, left completely in the dark as to the precise reasons that could have led the evangelist and his school to make this choice, and Jeremias concordistically makes reference to a notion supposedly shared by the main Christian communities in regard to the sacrament of the Eucharist, a circumstance that may be postulated rather than demonstrated in the realm of Christianity at the turn of the first century, still split up into numerous communities, uncoordinated in matters of doctrine or government.[8]

Another interesting contribution comes from Dodd. Having previously dismissed Bultmann's position as merely a "curious theory,"[9] he presented an explanation comparable to Jeremias's and more contextual and shrewder from a literary standpoint; in his view, the sacramental omissions in John are to be ascribed to the presence of pagans among its readers that the evangelist was hoping to bring to belief in Christ by arguing along lines more accessible to them, with the sacramental aspect as the final result of a gradual initiation to Christianity.[10] In this way Dodd provides an adequate literary and pedagogic explanation for the significant presence of Dionysian symbolism in the miracle at Cana, and in other episodes and at strategic moments elsewhere in the fourth Gospel; and taking the idea further, it develops into a threefold target audience: Christian, Judaic, and pagan. However, its serious limitation lies in its merit, that is, it is essentially concerned with the readership and not with the necessary religious explanation required by a substantial text in which every literary or expository detail has its precise theological reason.

As proof of the deliberate, complex nature of the operation, there are clearly discernible signs that the sequence relating to the institution of the Eucharist has been cut.[11] Everything points then to a part of the text having been intentionally removed, and the most contextual approach is to see this not as an unrealistic antisacramental polemic but as an invitation to meditate further on the meaning of the sacrament and the need to interpret and live it in conjunction with the overall experience of Christ's mediation. It is not

ritualism that saves, the repetition of a performative gesture that becomes exterior on its own, but the choice within oneself to love with the love that is the driving, qualifying force of the Christic mediation. Even if the message is cryptic, and precisely because it is cryptic, it can be recognized once we assume the sacramental value of the *entire* experience offered by Christ, namely its power to save when it becomes part of our lives. So it may be said that this stratified, allusive language assumes the institution of the Eucharist to be known and shared, and takes development and awareness to a further level, which would explain the use of an enigmatic kind of expository technique and the omissions.

By way of confirming the fact that the evangelist's community accepted the reality of the sacrament, it ought to be mentioned that one of his followers—the so-called final editor who was also responsible for adding chapter 21—probably inserted a sequence that develops words relating to the institution of the Eucharist omitted from the pericope of the Last Supper. This sequence is inserted in 6:51b–58, at the climax of the speech about the bread come down from heaven; the verb used is *katabaino,* as in the *logion* about the Son of man, but here it takes on the explicit connotation of the *katabasis,* the descent, into the world of the dead. Verse 51b is particularly interesting: "and the bread that I will give is my flesh [*sarx*] for the life of the world," where the forceful term σάρξ comes closer semantically to the original—Aramaic or perhaps even Hebrew—words spoken by Christ than the more generic *soma,* body, used by the synoptics, for which there is no exact equivalent in Aramaic or Hebrew.[12] In any case, *sarx* emphasizes the creatural frailness of what was offered by Jesus to save the world, the historical, human reality of his choosing to sacrifice himself.

These observations have a solid basis in correspondences and connections with the text, and certainly move in the most fruitful direction. Nevertheless, the actual cut made in the account of the Last Supper continues to give rise to doubts and perplexity that explanations too general in nature, like Cullmann's, are able to reduce, at their best, but not resolve: Why leave out a passage of paramount liturgical importance if the evangelist and his school shared the same sacramental realism as the other versions transmitted by the New Testament? And on the other hand, as has already been said, such conjectures as an esoteric silence, to exclude those outside the community, or a gradual pedagogic approach to the pagans are either too forced or

too specific; and between the two extremes of not-knowing and knowing, a Gospel that is and has to be a message addressed to all people is bound to find the medium of a message that is able to speak to initiates and noninitiates alike, to the experienced and the ignorant, promoting their transitional growth and development through the Christian *paideia*. The diversity of the readership, which Dodd's reconstruction helped define, provides the most consistent explanation for these communicative and textual anomalies, but clarifications of this type only introduce the problem; they do not supply a full answer.

Consequently, the authors of John, followed by their community, must have had serious reasons for conceiving, developing, and sharing an absolutely unconventional Eucharistic doctrine, with such apparent assurance and indifference toward the *traditio recepta*. Such motivation could not have aimed to produce harmless theological variants on a varied, confused, and a priori orthodox scene, or pursue hardly evangelical protective strategies to exclude outsiders, or evolve simple rhetorical techniques of persuasion in the style of Clement's *Protrepticus*. Concordism in its haste to find immediate and reassuring answers loses sight of the specific sense of the teaching that the fourth Gospel wants to transmit, while other one-sided or partial explanations lose sight of the theological context and the ceaseless effort to be faithful to the original teaching that inspired it. In short, the textual manipulation in John remains a stumbling block that is far easier to sidestep than to overcome.

We will venture an overall reading of such a singular, provocative strategy of narration and argument, an interpretation throwing light on the debate over the Eucharist that divided Christians as much as it ought to have united them, and brought Catholic and pro-Bultmann Protestant commentators into conflict over the presence of a sacramental or an antisacramental vision in the fourth Gospel. We need to bear in mind both tendencies, pro and contra the sacrament, since both cover a segment, broad or narrow as the case may be, of a hermeneutic process, though neither realizes its extent or consequences. This process stretches over the whole gospel from beginning to end in an extremely specific fashion, creating an unmistakable theological afflatus that takes us right to the source of Christology and of Trinitarian theology itself. If we are to grasp the overall unity of the Gospel we must not overlook the beginning, which is not just a textual starting point but its

constitutive principle. It is *the* Principle, the *arche,* indissolubly bound up in the fourth Gospel with the heart of the Eucharist, with the body of the *Logos.*

### 3. In the Beginning was the *Logos*

In the Gospel's theological vision, the flesh, the *sarx* of the Eucharistic formula in 6:51b, comes to be all one with the descendent Christology proclaimed in the Prologue: "And the *logos* was made *sarx*" (1:14). Here the term *logos,* traditionally rendered as the Word (*Verbum*), and recently even as Communication,[13] might be validly translated as Mediation. The Greek term includes the idea of relationship and proportion, and its primary meaning of "word" conveys the idea of a force, a *dynamis,* that communicates because it creates a bond between those who are invested with it and use it, using it *because* they are invested with it, a vision they refer back to the first *logos,* the divine *logos* binding and connecting all mankind, all beings, and so allowing them to exist.

> In the beginning was the Mediation [*En arche en ho logos*],
> and the Mediation was with [*pros*] God [*ton theon*],
> and the Mediation was God [*theos*].
> It was with [*pros*] God from the beginning [*en arche*]. (1:1–2)

It would require an exhaustive word-by-word commentary to justify every single choice in translating/interpreting, and an infinitude of them have already been written. Suffice it to say here that the mediatory translation of *logos* gives back to the Prologue, at least conceptually, its powerful circularity, its uncontainable theological momentum, which is no less philosophical for that, and in a strictly historical and technical sense. And this remains true even assuming that the evangelist adopted and amplified a preexisting hymn, as the historical-critical analyses of the Prologue argue on the ground of acceptable reasoning;[14] in any event, he absorbed and adapted a stream of inherited ideas and thoroughly investigated them to produce a new synthesis on which his own thinking set the final seal, an assumption very well suited to Brown's hypothesis of a hymn composed in the Johannine community.[15] Naturally, the evangelist started with the biblical resonances

of the opening syntagma, since ἐν ἀρχῇ in the Greek of the Septuagint translated the Hebrew *Bereshit* of Genesis 1:1, but such exegetic and religious resonances combined with philosophical resonances since the incipit of the Hebrew Bible in its turn was a translation of the technical expression *arche,* used by Greek philosophers from the time of the pre-Socratics. This interlacing of influences is present anyway, objectively, and can be traced to a whole network of Judaic-Hellenistic culture into which the fourth Gospel fits perfectly, independently of how the author himself might depict it. The most acceptable conjecture, however, is that he was aware of the philosophical origin of the Greek concept of *arche,* and quite willing to accommodate it in his thinking. This is proved by the inner, transcultural clarity that the text takes on, as in the pericope of the marriage at Cana, if we make it stand out against the historical background to which it belongs.

The Mediation beside God, in the presence of God, with God—depending on how we translate the preposition πρὸς—the Mediation that *was* God, to sum up and finish with all these shades of meaning, reveals its full import if we assume it to be the Johannine and Christian answer to the question that pervaded Greek philosophy in its infancy: What is the real *arche* of nature, of the world of Being? If the evangelist did in fact develop an earlier hymn, this convergence, this answer to the same problem, would be all the more significant, letting us really see for ourselves the fertilizing, unifying role of Greek *logos* in Judaic and Christian thinking. And this in spite of all the out-and-out differentialisms that the various religious and cultural camps involved have kept up for hundreds and even thousands of years, followed in turn by docile scholars confined within the narrow limits of their specializations.[16] These limited views are easily dismissed when we note the immense energy given off by the text once contamination gets underway, revealing itself to be unexpectedly constitutive and fully confirming the original nature of the final version. Just as there is no syncretism, since the outcome could not be more organic, so there is none of the leveling down of the Christian *logos* to the Greek claimed by the purely metaphysical approach to Christianity because, contrariwise, the Christian *logos* establishes itself as the final synthesis of the Greek *logos.*

Justinus's apologetic idea of using the notion of *logos* to build a bridge between Greek culture and the Christian message was more apposite than he could have imagined, since the bridge already existed, albeit decrepit in

places and covered in dense vegetation, but its existence was ignored. Constructed through a lengthy process of hybridization of Greek thought with Judaism following on the conquest by Alexander the Great, it pointed Judaism in a theo-logical direction (that is, based on *logos* applied to the divine), clearly monotheistic (that is, hinging on the problem of the *monos,* the One, applied to the divine), and culminated in interaction with Christianity. The reconstruction of this bridge and its strife-ridden history—at different times it was a crossing point, a drawbridge, and a barrier—falls outside the limits of this inquiry, but if we just recall its existence we can recognize some of its main pillars, as well as its overall function that was misunderstood by all the parties involved, too busy defending their own identities until the Christian mediation established itself. From the text itself it can be shown that the Prologue to John is not just the outcome of a complex cultural mediation, drawing on Plato and the pre-Socratics before him, passing then by way of the book of Wisdom and the Platonism of Philo, comparing and dismissing other notions of *logos,* such as the Stoics' material, immanent idea, and concentrating all these factors into the single mediatory figure of Jesus Christ. These transitions are all real enough, but there is something more, and it is decisive, that is to make the experience and the idea of Mediation central to everything, bringing Greek and Judaic thought to converge in the person of one man who is infinitely more than the divinized man of the Middle Platonic and Hermetic tradition because he is the man-God without whom nothing that was created would have been created (1:3).

It is extremely instructive to observe how this religious and speculative process, inestimably important and almost magically invisible, has completely escaped the attention of the greatest twentieth-century thinkers. Heidegger is a prime example since he, more than any other philosopher, set himself the problem of arriving at the original meaning of Greek *logos* as represented by Heraclitus, and distinguishing its Jewish and Christian meaning that felt like a foreign body, an ontic superimposition that prevented our arriving at the ontological difference between Being and being/entity or what-is. In *Einführung in die Metaphysik* Heidegger motivates the irreconcilable, incommunicable nature of the two *logoi* as follows:

> In the New Testament the meaning of *logos* is not at all, as in *Heraclitus,* the Being of entity [*das Sein des Seienden*], the collected totality of

> antagonisms [*die Gesammeltheit des Gegenstrebigen*], but *one* particular entity, namely the Son of God. And specifically in his role as mediator [*Mittlers*] between God and man. This New Testament representation of *logos* is nothing but the representation made by Judaic religious philosophy [*Religionsphilosophie*] that was developed by *Philo,* whose doctrine of the creation attributes the character of μεσίτης, of mediator [*Mittlers*], to *logos.*[17]

Through associating with Bultmann, Heidegger was well informed about the latest exegetical research work and, with his characteristic instinct for concepts and terminology, shrewdly identified the primary importance of mediation in the *logos* of Philo and John. But he assumes it to be something superimposed and added on, a voluntaristic, fideistic claim that makes the related *Religionsphilosophie* into a contradiction, an oxymoron with no right to exist in the realm of ideas, where the question of the "Being of entity" takes first place. In this way the syncretism of Philo is transformed in John into the most unlikely of claims, that is, that "*one* particular entity, namely the Son of God" embodies the full meaning of *logos,* thereby confusing Being with entity, which is precisely Heidegger's charge against Western metaphysics, against Platonic-Christian metaphysics that had erased the source-experience of Being, characteristic of Hellenic philosophy at its very beginning.

Heidegger, however, does not ask himself what it was that enabled Heraclitus's *logos* to contain in itself "the collected totality of antagonisms," as he effectively puts it. He fails to see that if Heraclitus was able to do this, it was because he relied on a mediatory force, the force of his own philosophy that was able to grasp and express, verbally and performatively, the *logos* of the entire *kosmos.* For Heraclitus, therefore, the paramount question was not to identify the absolute source of truth, Being, that once established acts automatically through unilateral, inscrutable grace like the Protestant God, but rather to find an effective channel for bringing the world of the *onta,* which is, in the first instance, the world of problematic *onta*—the world of the *polis* and unruly human beings—into communication with the harmonious world of *physis,* where the *onta* act in accordance with the universal *logos* and where the God of Heraclitus is supremely manifested, untroubled by the sufferings and miseries of mankind. But this means that mediation, in both

senses, intermedial and mediatory, was already the fundamental problem for Heraclitus, and not the abstract problem of Being and ontological difference. And the same problem was addressed by Plato, who actually went so far as to deny that ontological status as such sufficed to resolve the difficulty. We will pause for a moment to consider this last step, a crucial one in view of the influence exerted by Plato's ideas on Judaic philosophy and on the author of John.

Plato explains his position in the *Republic,* or rather it can be understood from his characters' discussion about the strategic theme of the definition and knowability of the Idea of the Good. This comes immediately before the *mythos* of the cave, the beating heart of the entire dialogue with its reconstruction of the way up and the way down between the Ideas and the sensible world, and his harsh allusion to the final fate of Socrates, which he has Socrates himself pronounce.[18] This is the salient passage in his argument:

> You will admit then that, for objects of knowledge, not only their being known derives [*pareinai*] from the Good, but that they also draw [*proseinai*] their being [*to einai*] and essence [*ten ousian*] from it, though the Good is not an essence [*ouk ousia ontos tou agathou*] but exceeds essence [*tes ousias*] in its dignity and power [*presbeia kai dynamei*].[19]

Many centuries later, this terribly tortuous passage inspired Neoplatonism, which found material there for its negative theology, but Plato is in fact saying nothing of the kind here. What he says is that the mediatory idea of the Good exceeds the existentive, ontic being of knowable objects, just as it exceeds their defining, constitutive being, their *ousia,* and this is because the Good is their productive and final principle, the axiologically supreme principle that actively procures for knowable objects, and for all things, the gnosiological and ontological properties inherent in them. Plato underlines this with the two verbs deriving from *einai* (*par-einai—pros-einai*), stressing the dynamic force and absolutely real presence of this process on its way upward and downward. Even if his *agathon* is not yet the God of Judaic and Christian theistic thinking, it is moving in that direction, as Middle-Platonic philosophy would emphasize, in wanting to perform the function of a supreme Mediation that everything arises from and returns to, in a way that Judaic and Christian thinking clarified by recognizing God as a person and

making him the creator of heaven and earth.[20] In his Unwritten Doctrines, to which the passage from the *Republic* probably alludes, Plato also sets the One beyond being and essence in its relation to the indefinite Dyad, because that tensional unity, that downward and upward process, really explains how Being, properly speaking, is able to fully manifest itself. It is not because entity is secondary and Nothing stands in its place, but because ontological and objectual wholeness, classically, consists in the living relation between the One and the Many, which is like saying in their full, continuous mediation that alone deserves to be called Being, understood in its substantial entirety, that is, as the totality of what-is, as its total manifestation able to reconcile in itself the opposites that make it possible. Incidentally, this is not so far from Parmenides's original idea when he speaks in his poem of the "way" (*hodos*) "that is" (*hopos estin*),[21] and not of Being understood abstractly as a separate (and thus still partial) reality.

Without becoming more deeply involved in these complex passages, we need to note at this point how Judaic thinking in the book of Wisdom and in Philo, with his idea of *Sophia* and of *Logos* performing an intermedial and intermediary role between God and his creation, that is, between the One and the Many of Greek philosophy, proceeds along this path quite legitimately, without any syncretism or *mésalliance,* in its search for an answer to a problem on which Greek philosophy remained silent: the problem of explaining the paradox of the One and the Many in its historical and existential roots, starting from the irreducible viewpoint of the human being. If, on the one hand, men's limited nature is deprecated in Greek philosophy as the cause of disorder and nescience, on the other it is always the precondition for setting itself the problem of *arche, logos,* Being, and the Good that the whole of what-is depends on, which is the same as saying the problem of Mediation since it encapsulates them all. And Heidegger, in *Being and Time,* was quite right to identify the There of mankind's Being-There (the *Da* of *Dasein*) as the opening condition that makes it possible to think of Being, ultimately corresponding to the One of Greek philosophy, only he refrained from dealing with the Mediation that makes it really thinkable. But, for Greek philosophy, that raised the tragically unanswered question of how to explain the specific, historical existence of the many human beings, with their will and capacity for rebellion, vis-à-vis the impersonal laws of *physis* and *kosmos* that should act uniformly for all *onta*. Judaic and Christian thinking tried

to give an answer to this paradox in theological and religious terms. In Judaism the metaphysical questions became personalized and dramatized, which opened up a new path within the spreading influence of Greek philosophy and unlocked the further prospect of reconciling the orderly arrangements of Plato's thought, which were grandiose but nevertheless still faceless, with the attempt of mystery cults such as Orphism to provide a mythical-ritual solution to the problem of evil, which offered to satisfy the individual's need for salvation.

The modern world suffers from a mental blank over mediations, though their suppressed content nevertheless haunts it like a ghost. Conditioned by this amnesia, Heidegger misses the continuity between the Greeks' investigations, notably Plato's, on the one hand and Judaic and Christian ideas on the other, just as he fails to see that the fundamental Christian statement does not consist in claiming that the solution to everything lies in "*one* particular entity," arbitrarily called the Son of God, but in a life-giving stream of mediation of which Jesus Christ is the total representative, for the purpose, though, of setting up a mediatory transitivity that everyone potentially may possess and benefit from. For Christianity, Christ is the bridge between God and mankind and could not function as such if he were not wholly God and wholly man at one and the same time, as was stated in the Christological dogma of the Council of Chalcedon. Potentially, this mediatory dynamism is present in the incipit of the Prologue to John; it then condenses to become the keystone not only of the entire Prologue but of the entire Gospel: "And the Mediation was made flesh" (1:14).[22] An announcement so daring and consequential has to be considered as well-meditated by the evangelist, even if it was part of the previous hymn as assumed by several commentators;[23] with one stroke it integrates and surpasses all that Hellenic and Judaic thinking had achieved up to that time. This "flesh" was the last objectual frontier to be crossed for the divine Mediation to humanize, recognize, and save what was human. From that time forward a new path was indicated for experience and thinking, the path of complete, achieved salvation for everything and everybody without exception.

Heidegger's terse conclusion that *Logos* in John is poles apart from Heraclitus's *logos* ("A whole world [*Eine Welt*] divides all this from Heraclitus"[24]) is no less stimulating than historically and theoretically incorrect, just as much as the answer given by Girard is inadequate, albeit understandably so,

turning the *querelle* around to the complete advantage of *Logos* in John and accusing Heraclitus's *logos* of conniving at sacrificial violence.[25] Arguments can be produced to support both theses, but it is not a question of absolutizing historical and cultural moments so distant from one another but of identifying the relationship that differentiates them and unites them in their quest to find a solution to the same problem. The answer lies in regaining the experience of mediation that modern philosophy has erased but that provided thinkers in antiquity, both Christian and pagan, with a framework for formulating their questions and their answers. This was the way the evangelist came to share in the mediatory and speculative heritage of Greek philosophy, whatever the exact influences and means might have been. It enabled him to achieve a transitive mediation inaccessible to the Greeks with their hierarchical, ordered vision of *kosmos,* in which the institutive *logos* of the cosmos had to remain distinct from those of the individual grades composing it, and willingly obedient to it. The *logos* of John, the Christian *logos,* in no way excludes this harsh vision; on the contrary, it presupposes it, as can be seen from the Prologue's dramatic contrast between light and darkness, in which there can be recognized—no matter how distantly—a development of Plato's attempt to explain the paradox of evil by the potentially limitless plurality of the indefinite Dyad. By transforming this intransitivity, permeated by tension and violence, into a supreme transitivity and transition, the evangelist is able to release the clear-seeing consciousness of the Greeks, so that the true face of the divine *logos* appears for the first time, with its capacity to transform the price paid for the old mediations into one all-embracing mediation, the only truly mediatory mediation offering salvation.

And one might go so far as to say that the fourth Gospel's interpretation of *logos* as mediation, and mediation as *logos,* is the outcome of a long and still incomplete historical process that started with the still partial meaning of the Greek word, immersed in cosmic mediations never fully perceived in their historical nature, and circles round to restore and give it fresh meaning so that its various acceptations and functions are brought together into a single experience and reflection, in this way redeveloping mediation as *metaxy*, its Platonic version meant as an intermediating reality, up to the point of living and understanding mediation as a supreme religious experience passed through the prophetic "theology of disaster," and thus paving the way to a monotheistic divine model, which is the Judaic version of mediation. The

Christian mediation develops this further and more fully and consists in setting it circulating again, deep down into human history. The progress of humanizing transitivity and transitive humanization is still far from coming to an end. This applies to Christian developments as well, where the interchange of ideas found in John has had to be defined and so set out more rigidly in theological formulas; admirable in themselves, they are inevitably indebted to metaphysical conceptualizing that is bound to become misleading and to block progress if disengaged from the movement that first began it and from the final destination that alone provides it with impetus and objectual purpose.

But how was the mediatory threshold that is crossed in the Prologue to the fourth Gospel first arrived at, a threshold undoubtedly linked structurally to the particular position taken by John in regard to the Eucharist. Is such an attainment consistent with ideas about mediation contained in other New Testament writings? And how does it relate exactly to the Yahwistic mediation? We must not forget that Judaic ideas were always the principal referent in John's thinking and that it was only through dialogue with those ideas that he communed so successfully and creatively with Hellenic philosophy. A further excursus is called for to consider the formation of the Christological mediation in Middle Judaism and in the various stages visible in the New Testament, and also to consider the organization of Christology and the related doctrine of the Paraclete in the Johannine school.

## 4. The Constitution of Christology

From the first verse of the Prologue, *Logos* in John stands for an originary power of mediation that comes from God and *is* God, according to a progression expressing the very soul of Judaic mediation, a progression that is historical and experiential rather than conceptual (and precisely because it is *also* conceptual). The absolute formulation given in John is Christianity's answer to the most urgent question facing postexilic and Middle Judaism, the question of identifying the mediator capable of guaranteeing the relationship with the God of Israel, in a word the mediator of the Mediator. This had already led to characterizing Yahweh himself as the supreme Mediator, who willingly and necessarily enters the history of Israel and all mankind,

manifesting himself in the flesh (in the "bones": Jer 20:9) of the prophet who mediates toward him, the Mediator, because he is thoroughly mediated by him. In other words, the fourth Gospel outlines the process forming and establishing Christology as a whole, and its version is particularly exalted since this *Logos* preexists and is coeternal with God. Nonetheless, if the core of the hymn utilized in the Prologue predates the Gospel's composition, it goes back to an earlier stage. This Christological preexistence provides the metaphysical and theological hookup that allows the evangelist to close the circle in relation to the poignantly creatural content of the Bible texts, to link it to the spiritual and hyperuranic world of Platonic philosophy. If we fail to grasp the circularity, the transitive reciprocity of this move, it will escape us entirely. But to proceed in orderly fashion, the first step is to set the preexisting Christology typical of John in its historical context, at a time when Christian thinking was still in midevolution.

Before we start, it needs to be noted that the New Testament contains quite different Christologies, the fourth Gospel contributing the unequivocal, explicit vision of Christ as the preexisting Son of God. This fundamental step in definition was taken up by subsequent Christologies, and finally fixed as the Christological dogma of the Great Church by the fifth-century Council of Chalcedon. The matter was bitterly contested along the way, and the final result was a delicate balancing act between the need to preserve the monotheistic oneness of the Christian God, by emphasizing the inferior status of the Son (Arianism), and the need to assert the divinity of the Son by proclaiming his nature as exclusively divine (Monophysism). The Chalcedon dogma has to be seen as one of the finest achievements of Greek philosophy, and not only Greek,[26] on account of the paradoxical tension so ably injected into its formulation, evidencing the extensive, constitutive interaction of Hellenic metaphysical concepts with the fundamental structuring of Christology, as of monotheistic theology as well. This historical awareness is not only enough in itself to call for the rewriting of whole chapters in the history of ideas so far irrationally split between a theology and a philosophy equally abstract and imaginary but it also shows up the partial, provisional nature of the historical result that we need to approach.

Indeed, we should recognize that what was being fought over in the fourth- and fifth-century Christological disputes between Arians and Monophysites was not the nature of Christ, human or divine, but two opposing

interpretations of Christ understood *in any case* as the preexisting Son of God, from the beginning of time, as the very first creature, or outside of time since he was generated and not created. Both positions fit in with Johannine Christology, though the Arian interpretation contradicts the clear precreational definition, while the Monophysite interpretation excludes the human nature of the *Logos* made flesh. One thing, however, remains undeniable though its consequences have still not fully registered even today: while ascendant Christology, the low form that arrives at Christ's divine nature from his human nature, has certainly been preserved, it remains definitely subordinate to the descendent interpretation, the high form of Christology in which the Son of God was made man to fulfill his mission of salvation.

And that means only one thing, that the Mediation made flesh was not understood in the prodigious reversibility it contains and initiates, in virtue of which the Mediation that is Light (1:7–9) "gives [*edoken*] full power [*exousian*] to become sons of God [*tekna theou*]" (1:12) to all those who will accept it. This is another essential passage that is to be attributed to the evangelist as far as its development is concerned; it necessitates a word-by-word gloss that will also justify my interpretation in translating it. The aorist ἔδωκεν is to be understood as definitive, a once and for all decision valid for all time. The term ἐξουσία connotes both possibility, since its exercise is bound up with the willingness to receive it of those for whom it is destined, and fullness, since once the authorization is accepted, it is entire, not in fractions, and is tantamount to fully achieved sovereignty, to the supreme fulfillment of freedom, with all the nuances of meaning that can be added by rethinking this *exousia* in terms of Bataille's sovereignty: the inner state of liberty attainable through one's *chance*, a spiritual renunciation of all what matters in life and of life itself. The distinction between *huios,* a more ontological term reserved for Christ, and *tekna* with its connotation of small children, of puppies, serves to underline not only the prime guarantee for such transitivity, made accessible by Christ's being the firstborn, but its future as well because the destiny of the divine cubs of men is to grow into adults. It seems to me that these summary reflections make it already sufficiently clear how much of the Christology in John still awaits rediscovery or indeed discovery for the first time in relation to its roots and still more its horizons. And at the same time this raises the question of its compatibility with other early Christian and New Testament Christologies.

I will not go into the evolution of Christology in the time between the death of Jesus and the first New Testament texts, that is, from 30 to the middle of the first century. Basically, theological reflection about Jesus develops along four lines: Christology of the Resurrection, in which Jesus vouches for his being the Son of God by rising from the dead; Christology of the *parousia* when Jesus manifests himself fully in his second eschatological coming; Christology of the ministry, examining the mediatory significance of the figure of Jesus through his public mission; and Christology of the preministry that sets out to establish the very beginnings of his designation as mediator sent by God, and concentrates on his birth and childhood.[27] These various Christologies cross-refer and combine, coming to bear in three temporal directions with an imbalance toward the past that was to have cumulative final consequences: starting from the *ever-present* and definitive experience of the Resurrection, the Christological models looked *forward,* toward the future of the last days, and *backward,* to reexamine Jesus's career and its supernatural background events.[28] Both of these temporal dimensions hold essential aspects of the figure of Christ, and preministerial Christology tends to sum them up in itself as a baseline theological explanation, implicitly leaning toward divine preexistence developed as a structural link connecting the story of Christ's life on earth with the suprasensible reality of the Platonic tradition. The Gospels set out with the aim of reconciling the two in a historical-theological account of Jesus's ministry culminating in his crucifixion and resurrection and including the promises relating to his final coming as well as the initial divine premises ensuring their fulfillment. The need to clarify the mystery of Christ in a preministerial direction resulted in the childhood gospels and a proliferation of myths, to which Matthew and Luke reacted by insisting on the divine conception stripped of all legendary superfluities, while John concentrated all his preexisting Christology in the Prologue.

One textual, historical datum cannot be denied: there is never any clear, unequivocal statement about Christ's divine preexistence in the Christology of the three synoptic Gospels, Paul, and the Epistle to the Hebrews, which certainly does not mean that their position excluded it, but that it had not then arisen as a point needing to be clarified and explained.[29] The three synoptics, each with its own particular theological accent, attempt to give an initial comprehensive answer to the question of who Jesus was, and their historical-narrative approach necessarily gives prominence to his public

ministry, leaving the facts (the *facta,* the ἔργα) to speak for themselves in what might be called performative Christology. For the moment, working backward chronologically, I will try to sum up the Christology of Luke and Matthew, the two synoptic Gospels that deal with it in greatest detail, linking ministerial Christology to resurrectional and *parousia* Christology, on the one hand, and to preministerial Christology on the other.

For Luke Christ is the culmination and final fulfillment of the prophesies made to Israel in the past, bringing his message of salvation to the lowly, the weak, and the disadvantaged; to these the God of Israel has always spoken, but he now enters a decisive phase by extending his message to all men of goodwill. The incomprehension of the official exponents of Judaism is no match for this providential will and is made to serve its ends as well; and this irresistible force creates a spiritual community of intent between Israel's finest heritage and the best of pagan culture, as the Acts clearly show. For Matthew Jesus is the last, decisive representative of the Messianic descendents of David, fulfilling God's promises to the chosen people, and since he is rejected by Israel's leaders and a part of the people, he extends those promises to all the Gentiles. On those Jews hostile to the Son of God he concentrates original sin, as revealed by the concealed crime of Zerubbabel's murder and investigated in depth by Middle Judaic theology. The pacific tone of Luke is missing in Matthew, and painful signs of a traumatic break remain, from which we can deduce that Matthew is still thinking within Judaic theological coordinates, in a kind of Judaism made universal in Christ and finally available to mankind as a whole.

The earlier gospel of Mark shows us a markedly ministerial phase of Christology that emphasizes Jesus's humanity; this can be evinced from the absence of any explicit mention of preministerial Christology and the displaced, elliptical references, in the original version, to the appearances of the risen Christ. In Mark Jesus's relationship as Son of God is revealed at the moment of his baptism by John the Baptist. The old theory, dear to liberal Protestants in particular, was that the Marcan Christ actually came to know he was the Son of God with his baptism, and so became such for all historical-religious purposes, in a sort of an adoptionist Christology with a subjective key; however, that idea is now discredited:[30] the Gospel of Mark begins by proclaiming the "Gospel of Jesus Christ," and when the voice speaks from heaven during his baptism what it makes known is an original

divine decree, entrusted to Jesus and for him to proclaim. The second Gospel presents no argument in terms of metaphysical preexistence, and yet Christ in Mark possesses a complete, direct title to mediate, willed by God and in accord with his plan for salvation.

Already, from this brief examination, it is apparent how the preministerial Christology of Matthew and Luke only emphasizes a divine provenance that remains undisclosed in Mark but is everywhere present there. While all three synoptics are dominated by a performative Christology, discoverable in the words and witness of Jesus and those who knew him, there is so much that lies behind it and carries a wealth of implications that it is clearly a mistake, both historically and hermeneutically, to assume linear progress from less developed to higher Christologies, out of deference to an evolutionism of a positivist stamp.[31] These Christologies, and others we have still to look at, share a common background derived from Plato but filtered through Judaic thinking, a background conception of divine reality as spiritually, transcendentally anterior, achieving its realization in the world of creation and history through its *Christos,* its unique Christological Mediator. What marks out the Johannine Christology is its speculative focus, suggesting a firsthand knowledge of Greek philosophy. The other evangelists, while they in no way exclude the more speculative, mystical aspects found in John, concern themselves with more directly religious, parenetic, and pastoral matters, strongly suggesting they shared a basic inspiration from which they developed independently with perspectives that differed from the start.

Paul's epistles provide detailed evidence of this polyphonic common ground and of the antiquity of preexistent Christology. The epistles, the authentic ones at least, date from before the synoptics; nonetheless their Christology is more pronounced and can be traced to the hymns and formulas that the apostle, followed by his school, utilized and developed in composing them. The Epistle to the Philippians, undoubtedly written by the apostle, quotes and interprets a Christological hymn of great importance where Jesus is strikingly described as "existing in divine form" (*en morphe theou hyparchon*—2:6). In the early Christian and Pauline idea of μορφή—to be opposed to Dionysus's *morphe* in the *Bacchae* but with an analogous sense of meta-morphosis—this expression seems to join together the Hebraic words *demut* (ὁμοίωσις, *similitudo*) and *selem* (εἰκών, *imago*) used in Genesis 1:26 to describe the creatural relationship of human being with God,[32] but

clarifying a Greek and Platonic influence already recognizable in Genesis, where the two terms still distinguish between the more abstract meaning of *demut* and the more concrete meaning of *selem,* while now the pre-Pauline and Pauline term unites both the acceptations in Christ's incarnation. However, as here the terminological and theological emphasis is on the Platonic Forms that conceptualize the hyperuranic reality of God from which Christ comes, and since the verb *hyparchein* connotes both existing and possessing certain definite attributes, it is not easy to express in modern language the type of theological and ontological condition the text refers to. What we have here is certainly elevated Christology of an early date that asserts a real preexistence of Christ without, nevertheless, specifying whether it is to be regarded as creational, as the parallel with Adam developed in Romans 5:12–17 would suggest, or precreational, as the verses following the hymn might suggest.[33] In any case, the point Paul wanted to reach is made clear by the memorable verses that follow, where he states that Jesus demonstrated his part in the divine *morphe* by not considering "to be equal to God" (*to einai isa theo*) as something to be jealously possessed but divested himself of it (*ekenosen*), "taking the form of a slave [*morphen doulou*]" (2:6–7). This last *morphe,* enriched by the semantic extension of the term δοῦλος that often described slaves (an allusion to the slave's death by crucifixion suffered by Jesus), reveals and testifies to the first, divine *morphe;* and this inversion is the very heartbeat of Pauline Christology.

Jesus is not a hyperuranic reality, remaining untouched in its supernal, impersonal, and ontologically objective condition like the Platonic Good and Aristotelian Unmoved Mover, though it is correct to see both as significant dynamic principles that the whole universe tends toward, while the soul of man, his *nous,* can ascend to them through the conceptual, existential mediation of *philo-sophia,* the love of wisdom; and we need to be aware of the passionate, emotional nature of this φιλοσοφία, purified but not destroyed in the logical labyrinths of post-Socratic dialectics. Paul's Jesus by no means totally contradicts these Hellenic premises, though the apostle had far different things in mind, certainly not philosophical abstractions, of which he expressed his mistrust when comparing them to the Crucifixion. But, aside from the more personal factors, the major characteristic of Paul's Jesus is his being a living Mediation with no need for cosmic or intellectual involvement, which is always selective and partial, always cold and unreciprocated

in its objectivity. On the contrary, this Mediation is its own testimony as it takes on the task of descending among men and women to gather them to itself, to achieve complete and definitive objectuality with them and among them, pledged and guaranteed by the Resurrection. The fourth Gospel was to take the same direction systematically, though still with no knowledge of theological definitions of a more metaphysical type, reflecting a fluid situation perfectly compatible with the more ministerial Christology of Mark, the Messianic-Davidic Christology of Matthew, and the Christology of a prophetic stamp to be found in Luke.

Deeply meaningful is Paul's profession of faith in 1 Corinthians 8:6, where he declares "for us there is but one God, the Father from whom come all things and by whom we are, and one Lord [*kyrios*] Jesus Christ through [*dia*] whom are all things and through [*dia*] whom we are." This really powerful Christological statement affirms the preexistence of the Son, though once more without specifying whether it is to be understood in a creational or precreational sense. At all events, a theological distinction is made between the Father, who has sent the Son, and the sovereign power mandated to Christ by the will of the Father; however, the accent falls on the Son's mediatory function, stressed by the twice-repeated preposition διά. Another Christological hymn utilized in the Epistle to the Colossians, and probably deutero-Pauline, proclaims Jesus to be the "first born of all creatures" (1:15); this definition, obviously lacking the technical connotations that the distinction between generated and created took on in Nicene theology, does not convey the idea of full preexistence, underscoring a preeminence that is creatural and also, in its mediatory oneness, creational.

In Paul, too, what I have called performative Christology is vigorously active, at a decisive moment for the formation of Christianity, and for our knowledge of it, as it is the earliest directly documented account. Paul, it can be said, with his focus on the ministry acting as the center of gravity for pre- and postministry phenomena, prepares the way for the thinking of the synoptics and complements it because his Christology takes for granted the teachings of Jesus when alive, only briefly mentioned here and there, and really starts from an extremely intense experience of the Resurrection and its aftermath that comes to embrace the *parousia* as expected imminently. One repercussion of this is a move toward radical reinterpretation of the present time and history as a whole.

The elevated Christology of Hebrews is exceptionally important, as is the entire epistle for that matter, and already takes us into a speculative atmosphere akin to the fourth Gospel. On the one side, the epistle utters from the start a solemn Christological profession, when it declares that God, after sending his prophets, "has spoken to us by his Son, whom he has appointed heir of the totality of things [*panton*], and by whom he made the worlds [*aionas*]" (1:2), where the plural genitive πάντων is clearly heir in its turn of the totalizing meaning acquired in the Greek thought by the neuter plural *ta onta* (all beings, entities) since Anaximander. On the other side, the text soon after states that Christ has "become [*genomenos*] superior [*kreitton*] to the angels" (1:4), so that unexpectedly this superangelic condition appears to be an acquired state rather than a preformed divine nature, and we must understand that the Son "for a little while was less than the angels," that is, was simply human.[34] Thus an implicit reference is made to the overall movement of Christology considered in its two constitutive sides, the descending movement starting from the highest precreational condition and the ascending movement starting from a subangelic and human condition that culminates in a mediatory restoration that proves to be definitive inasmuch as it is historical. The epistle is not interested in a doctrinal definition still not existing in technical terms, but in explaining more in depth how this prodigious mediatory device began and was fulfilled, as highlighted by the many prepositions expressing a change of state and a coming-to-be (ἐν, διὰ) throughout the whole text. The attention of the author is not devoted to an already defined Christology, but rather to the divine and historical dynamism through which the Christological mediation realized itself in a single man and thus became in this way completely accessible.

For Hebrews, too, the valid Christological criterion is performative: Christ's divine nature is deduced from the import and significance of what he achieved, but with a distinctive speculative profundity that renders it comprehensively recapitulative, since the Son sums up and finalizes practically all the mediatory titles that had abounded, and even conflicted, in Middle Judaism, reassessed here with a masterly theological interpretation of the surpassing of the Jerusalem cult. Christ is king, prophet, and priest, but all these prerogatives are his because he has put them entirely at the service of the Father's mediation, losing them and regaining them forever through his obedience to death on the cross.[35] The epistle therefore more thoroughly

examines and systematizes the Pauline dynamism of a Christological condition revealed *ex alto* and confirmed historically as a result of Christ's willingness to make the ultimate sacrifice of his life, the sacrifice making him "the mediator of the new covenant [*diathekes kaines mesites*]" (Hebrews 9:15).

The term μεσίτης confirms the origin of the epistle from Alexandria and in the wake of Philo's thought; it validates the connection Heidegger perceived but at the same time makes evident its inconsistency since Christ's role as *mesites,* if translated into the terms of *Being and Time,* would in fact consist in the openness toward death as the final existential possibility that Heidegger held to be the sign of authentic existence, with the difference that, in Christ, this authenticity lived until death marks the affirmation of the definitive life, of supreme objectual completeness. But Christianity's specific answer leaves Heidegger indifferent, from the conceptual viewpoint at any rate. According to his closely argued position in *Was ist Metaphysik?,* any answer other than the Nothing that opens to ontological difference is bound to consign Being to oblivion and lapse into the ontic. But in that way Heidegger only repeats his initial object void, rejecting a priori any alternative answer to this very negation, to the (basically anti-Christian) antiontologism of the Neoplatonic One, so making it impossible that he would grasp the meaning of Christogenesis, Christology, and the creational/creatural acquisition of Christian mediation. Thus he cannot realize that the love in Hebrews that conquers death by making it instrumental for life is the secret of the ultimate mediation between man and God initiated by Christ, and is precisely the new bond, adopting the old sacrificial ties and transforming them into a sacrifice that frees from every tie, in the definitively objectual relationship made explicit by the *Logos* of the fourth Gospel.

Christology as we see it in Hebrews is at a stage of development to some degree intermediate between the synoptics and Paul, on the one hand, and John on the other, since Christ, presented in 1:2 as divine cocreator and then proclaimed with great ritual significance as the ultimate high priest who goes into the presence of God in heaven in order to complete his work of mediation (9:24 et seq.), takes on the role and attributes of incarnate divine Wisdom, and does this precisely because he is wholly qualified as mediator, *mesites,* of all creation through the ascendant process of choosing self-sacrifice that proved he was the one and only Christological mediator. So intense and vertical is the sense of Christological performativity that it

is enounced from the very start as somehow self-evident; at the same time, this Christological generative power finds its confirmation/explanation in a dramatic historical-religious reconstruction exhibiting a consubstantiality with God very close to preexistence *ab aeterno,* though this is never explicitly stated. The author does not indulge in speculative details not because he is unaware or uninterested in them (he perhaps alludes to such at 5:11: "On this we should have much to say and hard to utter," and at 9:5b: "We cannot speak of this now in detail"), but because, as we hypothesize, he does not want the recipients of the letter to confuse the newness and power of Christ's definitive and incarnate mediation with resemblances not fully mastered to the Middle-Platonic metaphysics, evidently well known to him at least from Philo. This might give us a glimpse into a preparatory stage of the future theology of Origen.

This complex progress of theological thinking, closely linked to a historical experience and gradually developing as the experience is more deeply penetrated, reveals both the originality of the Christology in John and the many threads tying it in with other investigations, all having in common their unforgettable encounter with a total, incarnate divine mediation, combining in itself Plato's way up and way down. And it is the fourth Gospel that helps debunk all the positivist and historicist ideas of preordained evolution since, in addition to its preexistent Christology, the text preserves something of the ministerial Christology of Mark, saying nothing explicit about Christ's virginal conception and starting his mission of salvation with the Baptist's proclamation, stemming from the mediatory designation of Christ just before it that is revealed through the workings of the Holy Spirit. At the same time, the Prologue to John appears to condense and utilize every preministerial Christology concerned with Jesus's conception and early life, possibly confining the latter to its reappraisal of the sign given at Cana. The conclusion is that the Christological tradition of the first Christian generations was made up of a series of lines of interpretation and development, all part of a process that was plural but in agreement on certain basic features; an elevated Christology finally prevailed, with the fourth Gospel an essential stage in achieving this but by no means the only one.

Certainly there was no maze of criss-crossing conflicting interpretations, with the Nicene Christology finally coming out on top by accident, or even bound up with the logic of power—a view favored by quite a few

scholars today. This idea, masquerading as critical historicism, is essentially antihistorical in that it ignores the cultural context of the process with its overriding quest for an adequate definition of divine Mediation, starting from the Middle-Judaic debate that had a formative influence on Jesus and the development of his mission. Behind that debate lay the interaction with Greek civilization, both direct and indirect, that had opened Judaic thinking to the possibility of clearly defining the relationship with the national God; it had introduced not only the universalism of philosophical ideas but also the existential, historical drama of tragedy that came to provide a key for interpreting the experience of prophets and the chosen people.

Through the idea of mediation, we are able to understand the decisive force driving Christology, and that was its quest to find the *sole authorized bearer* of the mediation of the God of Israel, the Son of man, the successor to Moses or Elijah, the Messiah, the *Christos.* The term "Christology" has had a negative influence on research, immediately suggesting the establishment of its specifically Christian meaning, whereas the accent ought to fall on the mediatory meaning of the title Χριστὸς = *Mešiah* (*Mašiah*), which was the central concern of the Middle-Judaic debate, although in the context of that debate the title had still to take on the central importance that it was to have in Christianity. And it is easier to understand how that central position was acquired if we relate it not only to the impact of an outstanding religious personality but in addition, and not by way of contrast, to the accuracy of Platonic philosophy in identifying the problem of *metaxy,* the intermedial experience through which full access to the reality of the divine is made possible. Knowledge of this came into Judaism and Christianity through a variety of channels and translated into the search for the definitive mediation; for Judaism this was still refracted through a mediatory chain that culminated in the sovereignty of Yahweh, while Christianity concentrated it in the final, plenary mediation of Christ.

In Israel there is, then, a Christology before Christology, and this observation helps us grasp what must have occurred between John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth, against a background of Greek influence penetrating Jewish thinking not only from the start of the Hellenistic age but probably before, and shaping the great and contradictory period of Middle Judaism, to say nothing of the imperial Roman context with its idea of world power based on sovereignty and law. John the Baptist appears before Israel not as a

mediator but as a herald to proclaim an as yet unknown mediator to be sent by God, awaited by Israel to interpret and precipitate the end of time and punish the reprobates that refuse to repent and convert. For their own purposes, all four Gospels emphasize this proclamation of a mediator appearing in the very near future, and the datum must be considered as undoubtedly historical; John, however, was certainly not thinking of Jesus of Nazareth, and only later came to suspect he was the Chosen One but never really shed his reservations.[36] His originality lies in this idea of awaiting a single Mediator invested with the full divine mediation as it relates to Israel, and in a perspective no longer theological-political but strictly eschatological. Jesus took this a step further, making the eschatological expectation positive by linking it to the proclamation of the Kingdom; except that the Kingdom shows itself to be already in operation through being accepted and taken to their hearts by those who understand it, which gives it an inchoate but completely effective fulfillment. In proclaiming the Kingdom, Jesus interpreted himself as this sole Mediator authorized by the Father, king of the heavenly *basileia*.

This is the real start of the earliest Christology in a theologically more technical and specific sense, and develops in positive what the Baptist had limited himself to announce in negative; it would not be incorrect to define it as implicit in relation to the post-Paschal developments that use the mediatory definition of *Christos* or *Mešiah* quite openly, though it is not at all implicit if our analysis includes the central category of divine and saving mediation, which Jesus claims decisively for himself. The historical Jesus took part explicitly in the Christological debate of his day, and the answer he gave was conclusive, involving not only his teaching but his person as well. Only this observation justifies the mission he chose for himself and the thinking behind it, which can only be reconstructed adequately once its theological center of gravity has been restored.

In Jesus Christology becomes theological reflection about a Messianic mediation completely present in history but having its origin in the loving transcendence of the God of Israel, a mediation that presupposes one authorized mediator, representing in himself all the powers of renewal and salvation of the divine Mediation, at the service of a universal transitivity that transfers a corresponding title to all those wanting it, their authorization and mediately their authority (*exousia*) to become God's children themselves, sharing fully in God's saving mediation. Jesus's mediatory insight

is extraordinarily simple and powerful, and it is that the total mediatory representation he takes upon himself makes no claim to being a possession since it consists in completely relinquishing all prerogatives and staking his all on bringing about the mediation of the Kingdom. The mediatory privilege is inseparable from the complete surrender of all privileges, because its privilege is precisely to give up everything provided that the Father's Mediation of love is implemented. As Paul makes clear, Jesus's mediation is in no way a possession, an acquired title, or an elective, discriminating investiture, since it consists in giving up every and all possessions apart from sharing with others, with everyone. Through transcending all objects it is definitive objectual acquisition and attains to the conditions of the supreme objectual mediation, the ecstatic mediation that creates love. In the Middle Ages, St. Francis of Assisi, the *alter Christus* who gave fresh impetus to the Christic, Christological, and Christian mediation, gave precisely this interpretation to the message of Jesus of Nazareth, paving the way to the mystic-historical conception of Dante.[37] All of this sheds light from within on the establishment and development of Christology and shows the underlying unity in the very variety of interpretations and theories that have marked its course through history.

All later interpretations make use of Middle-Judaic theology and Greek philosophy to investigate more thoroughly only one experience and proclamation of Jesus, that of the one proleptic Mediation coming before the definitive Mediation of God which it already is in the presential, objectual dynamism it sets in motion. This mediation is characterized structurally by two fundamental factors, starting from the person announcing it: first, it is the living, present totality of the Mediation and, secondly, it begins the complete transitivity of the divine Mediation. Thus we obtain three closely connected, interrelated stages in this process, in which the three temporal dimensions distinguishable in the development of the Christological doctrine are unraveled and concentrated, and the discovery of the Christological mediation made by the post-Paschal reflections as they looked back in search of its origin is projected into the future. There is first of all a sort of mediatory condensation in the person, words, and deeds of the single Messianic and proto-Christological mediator (to draw a distinction between the Middle-Judaic and later Christian titles) that ineluctably evokes the Father's loving mediation. And then that dynamic, achieving condensation highlights

how the divine Mediation is entirely present in the Messianic mediator's testimony (second stage), and how it becomes the dynamic spiritual wealth of anyone willing to accept it (third stage). Here already, potentially, are the three aspects or moments, the three mediatory functions organized by Christian thinking as the three persons of the Trinity. Christology by no means corresponds to the theological comprehension of the second stage, understood in isolation with the other two aspects added to it; rather, in its own constitutive mediatory experience, it holds all three aspects inseparable from itself. Later thinking was to separate them and examine them thoroughly, in a circular movement between the future and the past, starting from ever-present faith in the risen Christ.

This means there is no contradiction between the different Christologies confronting one another in the first Christian generations and in the various texts and editorial strata of the New Testament; they reveal, instead, essential continuity once we understand that their inner dynamism is the very same from the beginning to the end. Viewed in this way, there is no basic difference between Paul's Christ, the firstborn of all creatures, Christ the Son of man and God in the synoptics, Christ who is above the angels in Hebrews, the preexistent Christ-*Logos* of John, the Christ-Son of Origen's Christology, and the Trinitarian hypostatic Christ of Nicene theology and the Cappadocian Fathers. The post-Paschal Jesus who grandly declares at the end of the first Gospel, "All sovereignty [*exousia*] has been given to me in heaven and on earth" (Mt 28:18) already corresponds, in his centrality and mediatory totality, to the preexistent Mediator of the fourth Gospel and the Trinitarian Mediator of theologies in the following centuries, but his sovereignty, his *auctoritas,* always consists in permanently pronouncing and perpetually implementing the Sermon on the Mount, in giving all men and women the *exousia* to become God's children.

This is not to say that all Christologies add up to the same thing. The Gnostic and Monophysite Christologies by recognizing only the divine nature of Christ upset the dynamic mediatory balance that is the secret of Christological mediation, just as the Ebionite and Christian-Judaic Christologies upset it in the opposite direction by recognizing only the human aspect of Jesus. Both disrupt the objectual transitivity that is Christology's real goal and motivation, however much it has been withheld and insufficiently acknowledged in the metaphysical formulas codifying the dogmas of

Christology and the Trinity, though they have always kept at heart—and this must be said by way of tribute to their conceptual balance—the historicity of Jesus the man. And it is all the more symptomatic that that balance has been ensured not by renouncing but by developing the heritage of Hellenic concepts so vitally important in establishing theo-logy, the *Logos* of God, in Judaism and Christianity in the first place.

In that process the Christology of John played a decisive part as a link, consolidating earlier and contemporary formulations that were still mostly Judaic in character, but this time in a formulation that brought to light hidden elements in them. The new conceptual concentration gained in this way was applied in the Prologue to the Greek notion of *logos,* adopting its communicative and human values as well as its metaphysical and theological values, starting from the Jesuan experience. What is involved here is no longer a matter of philosophical and religious contamination or conflict but a mediatory wellspring, presented as the central moment of divine life and its diffusion in the world. Setting the light against darkness in no way expresses a dualism,[38] but describes the opposition to the transitivity that is the original impulse of the light divine. Dualism is the perspective of darkness, and not of God or the *Logos* that fulfills his Mediation. Moreover, the fact that the Prologue includes an earlier hymn shows that the line of theological thinking here was far from being thought up by the theological genius who composed the fourth Gospel but belongs to a tradition we can trace back to some extent to the Beloved Disciple and, through his testimony, to the experience of Jesus of Nazareth.

At this point we can see how the first verse, "In the beginning was the Mediation, and the Mediation was with God, and the Mediation was God," sums up and breathes new life into the development of Christology, that is, the development of the theology of the Christ-*Logos.* In the first place, it states that the *Logos*-mediation existed in God's plans from the beginning, from the *arche;* secondly, that it was "with" (*pros*) him, being his manifestation; and, thirdly, that it coincides with him being a transition that unites and sums up all things in God. There is already a circularity here corresponding, potentially, to the procession, theorized by reflection on the Trinity in the fourth and fifth centuries that gradually worked its way, against much opposition, to the knowledge that the Trinity consists not in subordinationism, to a greater or lesser degree, but in completing a process of full, absolute

transitivity between the three persons of the Trinity. However, this transitivity would be no different structurally from the relations between Middle-Platonic entities, to which it is undeniably related, if it did not include the central moment in which the creator is made creature and becomes flesh, revealing what was contained in the creational *arche* and gathering all things to himself in a circularity that completes the entire creation.

There is, then, no Trinitarian theology in the Prologue to John, for the very good reason that all the premises for it are there, for the essential reason that its initial movement is there, encapsulated in the moment-*arche* of the *Logos*-mediation that was with God, and *was* God—in the heavenly, otherworldly dimension of the beginning of the hymn, and in the central moment, worldly and intramundane, of the *Logos*-mediation made flesh—entering into history and altering it irreversibly from within to reveal a creational plan that was in God from the beginning, unfolding in all the forms of creation, making possible, through the Mediator who is the Christ, the "ingod-ing" of all beings. The aim of adopting this Dantean language here (I am referring to the verb *indiarsi*), besides indicating the relevance of the doctrine of redemption developed by Italy's greatest poet and religious thinker, is to emphasize the essential unity of a line of reflection that constitutes the very backbone of the Christian tradition. The process of defining the three persons of the Trinity theologically began from the three stages set out in the first verse of the Prologue, where the third recapitulative stage, in which the *Logos* attests that it *is* God, makes the sense of the other two accessible and is resolved in them. And that explains why the pneumatology of the Trinity is the last part of Trinitarian theology to develop and why it has to draw on very meager indications in scripture, though not surprisingly the most decisive are to be found in John, with its densely meaningful definition of the *parakletos*.

The παράκλητος is not only a legal image indicating the defender of the accused and the accuser of his accuser, that is to say, of the διάβολος, the slandering accuser who holds sway in this world.[39] It includes that meaning but it then goes on to develop much more extensively, and if limited to that simple scheme of opposition it would justify the charge of dualism that has always cast its shadow over exegesis of the fourth Gospel. In actual fact, all the shadows dissolve as soon as we remember that the evangelist uses the contrast between darkness and light to make it possible to recognize an absolute difference, and once that difference is understood and meditated

on it dissolves the negative term that appeared to sustain it and puts in its place an irresistible process of transitive, saving mediation. The *parakletos* is Christ who stands as witness and intercedes for all mankind, and also the divine *dynamis* that continues his witness and redemptive action; and that is precisely why he refers to it as "another *parakletos*" (14:16) to be sent to his disciples.

The Paraclete provides the occasion for me to clarify an essential aspect of Christic, Christological, and Trinitarian mediation, namely, its responding to an absolute transitivity in which the personal aspect takes second place, or rather is brought out as *resulting* from the transitive mediatory process, as a supremely objectual act of creation and not as a metaphysically objective datum, which in fact would nip any relational dimension in the bud (as happens today since the metaphysical language inherited from the tradition is fossilized, making it easier to preserve it like the empty case of a chrysalis rather than rethink it seriously in cognitive terms). This means that all the great figures of Christian mediation—Jesus, the three persons of the Trinity, even Mary herself—are first and foremost mediatory *functions,* their strength lying, not in some objective or metaphysical possession, but in installing themselves at the ecstatic heart of objectual creation, in making themselves a transparent intermediary for it. That is why the Paraclete is the most elusive person of the Trinity, not because it is the last and most evanescent but because, theologically and historically, it provides 'fungibility' to the mediation of the Trinitarian God, gives it the spiritual power to incarnate itself in any human historical situation so as to make it instrumental in its Trinitarian circularity. The Holy Spirit is without a precise name or preestablished identity because it has all names, all identities. The Father appears to have a single, transcendent identity, but the paternal connotation itself proves his profoundly relational nature; the Son makes this relational, loving nature manifest and introduces a duality that becomes unity, that perfect identity of Father and Son that is the cornerstone of John's Christology; and lastly, the Holy Spirit shows us that this unity that becomes dual and this duality that is confirmed as unity can be incarnated in anyone, and is the dynamism of God itself that extends to the whole of creation. Plato's hyperuranion is made alive, becomes human, comes down to earth and becomes *sarx;* and in that way it accomplishes the objectual recognition of the whole of what-is and completes its salvation.

This Christological and Trinitarian excursus, which is no simple excursus because it has taken us to the heart of the Christian mediatory experience and the web of influences that led to it and condensed in it, will enable us to complete, as far as we are able within the limits of the present study, our examination of the vision of the Eucharist in John. In my opinion, it is the high point of New Testament thinking about Christ's relationship to sacrifice, and we shall look at it from the textual and historical perspective in the following chapter. And if we consider the centrality of the question of sacrifice, we have reached a comparative peak as well, but so dense and compact we easily overlook the historical and religious terms that made it possible.

## 5. The Doctrine of the Eucharist in the Gospel of John

In John, the Eucharist is not a sacrament in the defining, circumscribing sense of the word, not a liturgical act complete in itself, from which, as such, results can be expected, and not limited to being a ritual operation of a performative, magical kind that is effective objectively and self-acting. Instead, it is the invisible act, the "sign" of a profound transformation that integrates the believer into the life of Christ, and so within the Trinitarian dynamic (that is, within the divine *dynamis* explained by later theological thinking in Trinitarian terms). It is therefore untrue to say the fourth evangelist does not believe in the sacrament: on the contrary, he assumes his community knows about it already and performs it just like the other early Christian communities; and it is not unreasonable to think he perceives its miraculous character in being a performative event that is unique and at the same time multifaceted, the object of commemoration but ever present, perceptible in the species of bread and wine and yet ontologically identical to the flesh and blood of Christ. But, after all, it is a "sign" and no different in that respect from the other miracles; if set in relation to Christ's saving mission and life, they are effective intermediaries, but if artificially detached from it they change and become as many causes for being misled and deceived, like the shoots of the Christ-vine that live and are a source of life as long as they are not detached from the Christic tree.

The dangers connected with misunderstanding the Eucharist as ritual are not reduced as it comes closer to the person and mission of Christ and

becomes sacramental identity; on the contrary, they increase, making the slightest deviations from its true meaning more serious because of their moral and ecclesial consequences. However, these observations are not enough in themselves, since they have not yet explained the precise sense in which we are to understand the attitude of faith and belief in Christ that is summed up in the experience and notion of believing and having faith. A complete answer to the question would entail reconstructing the checkered Middle-Judaic debate over the meaning of "faith." However, for our purposes, suffice it to say that, in the more innovative theological solutions, the notion indicates in any event the fullness of the mediation of God, actuated through gradual concentration on the intermedial figure par excellence, the Messianic mediator, and the corresponding tendency to complete participation that represents (that is, makes effective and present) the hoped-for, final overturning of Israel and mankind's state of sin (that is, their condition of objectual remoteness, in itself irremediable).

Two aspects are to be noted: the first is what might be called the attraction of opposites, by which it is mankind's state of absolute objectual and moral destitution that draws to itself the saving action of the divine mediation, in accordance with a theological and moral development of the double bind between defeat in this world and divine victory that had generated Israel's mediations, at first henotheistic and then monotheistic; the second aspect is a basic wavering in the Middle-Judaic search for a full and definitive mediation, which oscillated between futuristic, apocalyptic solutions and Qumran's presentialist solution, where the community of the elect is already equated with the assembly of angels in the presence of Yahweh. In the Jesuan and Christian position, this sort of theological, eschatological vortex that ascends from the predominantly collective plane of Middle-Judaic theologies to the personal plane—and only through this is it collective—is transfused with an existential and moral fulfillment that is already fully present though not definitive. In this fulfillment, acknowledgement of one's own objectual poverty is all one with a total willingness to forgive the faults of others, and ipso facto turns acknowledgement of sin into a stepping-stone to God's infinite mercy.[40]

Christ becomes the figure condensing and guaranteeing this vertiginous journey, and faith in him shows itself to be total inner acceptance of the interchange between the human and divine that is the deep structure

of his mediation. This is why the fourth Gospel uses the verb *pisteuein,* and never the noun *pistis,*[41] to express faith in Jesus Christ, thereby emphasizing its dynamic character as an experience to be lived; and yet it leads to the only true knowledge, as shown by the use side by side of *verba videndi* and *verba cognoscendi,* such as *eidenai* (to know because having seen) and *ginoskein* (to know, understand).[42] As an action, *pisteuein* is anything but purely subjective and hence partial and arbitrary to some extent: it is an existential, cognitive action, a peaceful and lucid ecstasy, with Jesus Christ as its object and mediator. Its real significance is made explicit at the end of the baptism sequence in the Baptist's solemn apostrophe, with its expiatory import: "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes on himself the sin of the world [*ho airon ten hamartian tou kosmou*]!" (1:29). The historical figure of the Baptist is almost completely subjected to the theological rationale of the fourth Gospel, and in this declaration he is made to be the prototype of the true believer and the realization of Israel's finest prophetic inspiration, in accordance with the line evident in the following sequence, describing the calling of the disciples, and eventually by the role of Mary-Zion in the marriage at Cana; the second panel of the diptych, the casting-out of the traders from the Temple, immediately predicts the difficulties to be encountered by Jesus's public ministry, the dramatic but glorious nature of the "hour" that has to come, coincident with the mystical cognitive experience of faith itself.

We must never lose sight of the typically Johannine accent placed on the sovereign dominion, the *exousia,* that the Son of man always exercises over events and that is his task to transmit to mankind. Following on the miraculous transformation of water into wine and the proclamation in the Temple court with its enigmatic reference to resurrection, the dialogue with Nicodemus presents a very rich theological explanation. For the first and last time, at two points (3:3 and 5), mention is made of the Kingdom of God, which may only be entered by being born again "of water and of the Spirit" (3:5), that is, by undergoing the fellowship of Christ outlined in the Cana/Temple diptych. This encoded indication is soon decoded in the announcement of the Son's sacrificial and soteriological destiny, effectively summing up the entire Christology: "For God so loved the world [*kosmon*] that he gave his only Son, so that whoever believed [*pas ho pisteuon*] in him might have eternal life [*zoen aionion*]" (3:16). The choice to *pisteuein* in Jesus

becomes rebirth, a new existential condition, and corresponds to the initial decision for Jesus, triggered by the mediation of love with him, and also to a growth in awareness whose glorious culmination is knowing one has to witness for him even to the point of being lifted up to the cross, which is the Son of man's only real *exousia*.

From this moment on, the Christological revelation gradually intensifies; performative episodes, the signs performed by Christ, now alternate with explanatory episodes, such as precisely the dialogue with Nicodemus and, successively, the Baptist's final proclamation and the encounter with the woman of Samaria that takes the symbolism of water a step further. There is a rising crescendo through the Book of Signs that provides its structure and expands it until the greatest *semeion* of all is reached with the resurrection or raising of Lazarus. This forms an introduction to the imminence of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection for which the Book of Glory with its copious anaphoric meditation is a preparation and commentary. But let us go back to the central passage about having faith in Jesus as trusting in him that by placing one's life in his hands one changes it completely, the only real precondition for understanding the sacrament of the Eucharist.

We must avoid abstract, representationist misconceptions about this faith, fostered as they are by the scholarly combinations favored by the dense hypo- and hypertextual network of the gospel text and by a theological mindset only too ready to play down the content of texts that it ought to find inspiring. Believing in Jesus Christ means only one thing, underscored by the expiatory nuance of the Lamb of God: it signifies following his capacity to forgive and love, to the point of sacrificing one's own life. And more as well: it means setting one's own life at risk every time one forgives and loves, making love the objectual dimension for which any other object whatsoever is given up, since love alone is the objectual condition that all other conditions derive from and depend on, without exception or attenuation. Otherwise, if only hinted at, they would deprive the supreme transitivity of its saving absoluteness and unbeatable power of circularity, a power able to overrule the darkness of the world and death: indeed it can actually transform it to make it positively instrumental for the divine mediation. This is the enigma the Gospel wants us to consider and, while the solution is denied to the superficial understanding of those who have not yet entered Christ's discipleship, the believer finds all the necessary elements to reach the answer

by a route that is only made esoteric through the reluctance of human beings to understand the secret of God's love.

This love in the fourth Gospel, translated into modern but by no means inappropriate terms, can be said to correspond intimately to Bataille's *chance;* it is boundlessly, liberatingly available in the same way, but this Christic love differs from Bataille's destructive vertigo in that it attains its object definitively: mediation is fully achieved. Nonetheless, we would be unforgivably superficial if we were to look down on this correspondence, from the height of the superiority supposedly shown by the Christian *Logos* in respect to the neurotic agitations of modern intellectuals, because as soon as we downgrade the *agape* of Christ to an obtained result, to a definitive theological acquisition, we lose it and with it we lose the mediation and the object as well. Instead, Bataille's *chance* shows us that what he calls sovereignty can only be achieved if it is not reified but remains an unlimited availability, ever ready to sacrifice itself and therefore not reducible to the existent. The Eucharist in John is nothing other than willingness to give one's life for one's brother man, to make oneself a sacrificial Host (from Latin *hostia* = victim)—a later term but one that fits the overall sense of the sacrament to perfection—perpetually offered to others in the name of Jesus Christ.

In itself the argument is already quite clear, but some strategic passages can throw still more light on it. If we return to the Book of Signs and the orchestrated crescendo of its development, in the pericope of the encounter with the woman of Samaria Christ explains the meaning of his mediation as "living water" (*hydor zon*)—that is, cool, refreshing, and also "alive" (4:10)—and asserts unequivocally: "For me it is food [*broma*] to do the will of him who sent me and finish his work [*ergon*]" (4:34). This food is no mere metaphor but an image to show the Christic mediation in its entirety as the means to salvation; and thus it fulfills what the single sacraments indicate both really and symbolically, from the baptismal water to the bread and wine of the Eucharist, bringing them together in one flowing tide of salvation first anticipated by the sign at Cana. This creates a realistic/spiritual complex, unified as long as it moves from the Spirit that gives life to matter because it created it, but splitting apart and once more plunging down the moment it stops at the material level, deprived of the saving dynamism that unites it with God through Jesus and his sacramental sign of bread.

Warning of this is given by Jesus when he starts to explain the sign of

the feeding of the five thousand to the assembled crowd. The phrase in 6:15, where the crowd wants "to take him by force, to make him a king," makes it clear that they had come for nationalistically Messianic motives, still guided by a material criterion of physical presence and power. Here, very probably, the fourth Gospel, with its customary fidelity, is recording a turning point in Jesus's career and translating it into theological terms: this was the so-called "Galilean crisis" when the preacher from Nazareth had to take stock of the failure of the mass of people to grasp the transitive logic of the Kingdom, and made his decision to go up to Jerusalem for the last time.[43]

> Verily, verily, I say unto you: you believe me not because you have seen the signs [*semeia*] but because you ate of the loaves and were filled. You must strive [*ergazesthe*] not for the food [*brosin*] destined to perish [*apollymenen*] but for the food [*brosin*] that endures [*ten menousan*] in the life eternal [*eis zoen aionion*], and that the Son of man will give you; since it is on him that the Father who is God has set his seal [*ho pater esphragisen ho theos*]. (6:26–27)

There is an explicit contrast (that is, in terms of human logic, not from God's point of view) between the food (*broma*) that consists in doing the will of the Father and the material food, bringing an immediate but illusory satisfaction that consists in doing what we want without our being subsumed in the divine mediation, the gift of the Son that can unite us to the Father, to remain with him in everlasting life. The "seal" set by the Father on the words and person of the Son corresponds to the mediatory totality that he has attributed to him—fully realizing the Pauline *hyparchein,* it might be added—and this mediatory totality is expressed by an extremely well-calculated phrase, awkward to render in English, since the verb *esphragisen* is placed between the two *nomina divina,* the first indicating God's affective, creative relationship and the second simply describing him generally; and here, too, the articulation is threefold and single suggesting what was to become the theology of the Trinity. The Son of man is the "seal" connecting the loving mediation of the Father with the God of Israel, the keystone that holds them together and reveals their structure and inseparability: *theos* is not a mere reiteration of *pater* but sums up the Father who, by setting his seal on the Son, reveals the real Spirit of God, the life-giving Spirit that is God.

At the same time, the phrase can be read as a theological palindrome since we can take it to start from the notion of God who fulfills himself by acquiring his Fatherhood through the Christological seal set on the Son. Through the Son's mediation, both ways are possible and both express (continuing to read the after in the before) the Trinitarian reciprocity and circularity, the divine completeness, in which each divine agent of the mediation manifests as intermediation and as the supreme Mediation, starting with the Son of man's manifestation in history.

The metaphor of the seal, the focal point of the last phrase in the above quotation, is found again, greatly developed, in the symbol of the book of seven seals in Revelation and is loaded with nuances and implications that can be explored through *ruminatio,* that is, through repetition and meditation with what might be called a process of anaphoric thinking. The seal is in fact the first sign of a missive and the guarantee of its authenticity, while the contents of the missive can only confirm the seal's authenticity and initiate a circularity of interpretation with the seal, if we bear in mind that ancient seals were inscribed with signs and symbols associated with the sender. In our case, the sender is the Father, the seal the Son, and the text the Spirit. We might add, however, that the letter as a whole, and what it aims to communicate overall, is the Son who enables us to receive the divine message, the Word that is identical with him, and the Paraclete that continues his work. The Son is the messenger and the message, and this identification occurs because the messenger is prepared to die in order to bear witness to the message; by so doing he fulfills the divine dynamism underlying biblical prophecy and finally rounds off the movement of mediatory transitivity that is the secret of Christology. The bread of life, with the sacrificial meaning of love that it embodies, is none other than the start of this definitive transitivity, of this missive to be seen and read as a whole, inclusive of sender, bearer, and addressee. And, as long as it is seen as part of the communication aims that give it mediatory authority and the power to save, the bread is itself the seal.

If we fail to recognize transitivity as the essence of Christology we remain at a standstill, filling our stomachs with the bread and satisfied with "food destined to perish." It means we see only the material nature of the seal and leave the letter unopened, without gaining access to the supreme objectuality that transforms destruction itself and feeds on it. Many of those listening to Jesus were deaf to the Word and blind to the Light, and failed to understand

this, though the text of the Eucharistic sequence in John is made complicated by the probable editorial addition of 6:51b–58. The scandalized reaction of "many of his disciples" that follows (6:60) would make better sense if it was originally conceived for the evangelist's general theological reflection on the bread of life in 6:35–50. In any event, if we overstep the bounds of the historical-critical method and integrate it with theories of literary composition that take as their starting point the text as it has come down to us,[44] we come to the conclusion that the previous text has been adapted and resemanticized in the process of editing, but without in any way contradicting the evangelist's intentions. This applies particularly to the highly controversial phrase in v. 63: "It is the spirit that quickens [*to zoopoioun*], the flesh [*sarx*] is of no help: the words [*rhemata*] I have spoken to you are spirit and are life." There is no need to make a neat, formal distinction between the *sarx* of 6:51b and the *sarx* of 6:63, because in both cases the "flesh" is the same, interpreted first in its Christological, sacramental potential and secondly in its intransitive opacity, unable to gain access to the mediation and, therefore, its objectual dimension. In that sense it sounds by no means far-fetched to add that *sarx* in 6:63 is the dead flesh destined to corruption, while the *sarx* in 6:51b is the Eucharistic flesh of the risen Christ, that is, the flesh that has known death and transformed it, making it instrumental for the last sign, coincident with the significance and person of the definitive Christological Mediator.

The sacramental as conceived in the fourth Gospel meets perfectly legible criteria of Christological dynamism that are valid for the living water of baptism as for the bread of life of the Eucharist. And this Christological-sacramental vein is openly revealed at the climax of the Book of Glory, in the blood and water issuing from the wound in the side of the crucified Christ, not as symbols of the baptismal and Eucharistic sacraments regarded as separate liturgical moments but as symbolizing the Christic redemption through living water and his sacrifice on the cross that makes them real. When the "hour" of the Passion arrives it becomes possible to establish what the work is that Christ declares he has come to finish. The sacrificial resonance of the term *ergon* in 4:34, in the passage about "food" (*broma*), taken up again by the verb *ergazesthe* in 6:26, is in no way accidental or secondary, since the Christic *agape* is not achieved by putting one's life at risk, but by making this sacrifice the basis of one's love for others, the abasement of self in their exclusive service the secret of the lifting up to "glory" (*doxa*) of the Crucifixion.

This is what the washing of the disciples' feet means;[45] it gives historical reality to the descending and ascending symbolism of John's Christology, anticipated by the upward and downward movement of the angels in the saying about the Son of man and concentrated in the words to Nicodemus about God so loving the *kosmos* that he gave it his Son. We will look at the initial sequence, which tells us the washing of the feet occurred when the meal was over and so, on the assumption the meal has taken place, Christ's action comes as a climax and a commentary on it:

> On the eve of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to pass from this world to the Father: having loved [*agapesas*] his own in the world, he decided to love them [*egapesen*][46] to the end [*eis telos*]. And, supper being ended, the devil entered the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to drive him to betray him. Knowing that the Father had put all things in his hands, and that just as he had come from God so he was going back to God, <Jesus>[47] rose from the supper table and took off his garments [*himatia*], took a towel and wrapped it round him. He then poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet and dry them with the towel wrapped around him.
>
> Then he came to Simon Peter, who said to him: "Lord, do you mean to wash my feet?" Jesus replied: "You don't understand what I am doing now but you will afterward." (13:1–7)

The upward movement toward the Father now coincides with the going down of the Son of God who is led to the slaughter as the Lamb of God: the two moments lock together in a single strictly historical and powerfully mediatory experience; and this figural register, where symbol and symbolized coincide, reaches its maximum intensity following the theologically meaningful phrases referring to the Father who puts all things in the hands of the Son, and to the double movement of coming from and returning to God. Jesus gets up from the supper table to take off some clothing, and the same term is used to describe it as when the soldiers divide up his garments (*hymatia*—19:23) immediately after crucifying him, an action, as John's theology understood it, that Christ's executioners could not have carried out unless he had willed and preordained it. The lustral water of the marriage at Cana reappears here, no longer the Judaic water, inadequate because it lacked

the blood of the Lamb of God, nor just the precursory water of John's baptism, but the refreshing, living water of the Son of God who agrees to make himself the expiatory lamb for mankind; it is the baptism of water and Spirit, and the outpouring of blood with water of the Crucifixion. The reversal of the roles of master and disciple, of leader and led implied by Jesus's action is not understood by the disciples, and they are confused, Simon Peter to begin with, who do not realize the decision that makes such a reversal possible and confers on it the significance of the stripping-down of the Crucifixion, of the final lowering-rising for the salvation of the world. The words spoken to Simon Peter, "You don't understand what I am doing now but you will afterward," are substantiated in this saving, Christological fulfillment and reinforce the pericope's double, theological and historical, register through the imminent violence implicit in Christ's words and the dramatic incident of Peter's denial, predicted in 13:37–38, which is not an isolated and personal detail but an event revealing the darkness surrounding human lives until they are illuminated by the light of the Son.

In the following pericope concerning the vine and its branches the commandment already given to love one another is reiterated and developed and includes an explicit statement of Christ's offer of his own life:

> As the Father has loved [*egapesen*] me, so I have loved you [*egapesa*]. Abide [*meinate*][48] in my love [*agape*]. And if you follow my commandments, you will abide [*meneite*] in my love [*agape*], just as I have followed my Father's commandments and abide [*meno*] in his love [*agape*]. I have told you this so that my grace [*chara*][49] may remain with you and your grace [*chara*] become complete. This is my commandment, that you love [*agapate*] one another as I have loved [*egapesa*] you. Nobody can have greater love [*agapen*] than he who gives his own existence [*psychen*] for those he loves [*philon*].[50] (15:9–13)

Through the Mediation of the Son, the theological circularity between Father and Son becomes a loving circularity among human beings because love defines the very essence of God, as the Son's choice shows, and as was to be spelled out in 1 John, a work attributable to a close follower of the evangelist.[51] The verb *philein* can refer to a superior's benevolent attitude to an inferior or to a friendly relationship between equals; placing it here, within the

lexical group of *agapan-agape,* seems to me to express precisely this dynamic connotation of divine love that leads from a hierarchically ordered love relationship to one that is equal and undivided.[52] This circularity of salvation and life can start and become established if, from the beginning, there is someone who gives his own "existence" (ψυχὴν) for love of others. The Greek term *psychen* is unequivocal and yet includes nuances of the life "principle" (not forgetting that in ancient Greek, the equivalent word, ἀρχή, embraced both principle and beginning) from which the individual life stems, and also of the individual as a whole, and without any Hebrew or Aramaic retroversion since this sense is already present in classical Greece.[53]

The love than which there is no greater was not a final contingency but a decision taken by the Son, before the creation, in his desire to go down into the darkness since that was the way to save the created world and bring it to him. What the evangelist and his school have in mind is the dramatic myth of the rebellion by a part of the angelic host against God, seeing the Fall of mankind's first parents as its consequence. Postexilic and Middle Judaism had utilized this myth to interpret the complex evolution of monotheism from polytheism and to rethink, in theological terms, the question of the One and the Many that came from Hellenic philosophy. Now, in John, it becomes a means to acquire not only the ontological character of the divine mediation but its historical and moral character as well, and to solve a problem that had engaged the minds of the greatest Greek thinkers, that is, how to draw on the totality of what-is without being swallowed up by the One or torn apart by the Many. The fourth Gospel's solution lies in discovering the sense and experience of the One through dismembering the Many, and this is possible thanks to the sacrifice accepted by the One, the Only One, who thus brings into being his unifying mediation of love. As Simone Weil, who was deeply versed in John's thinking, wrote: "The function of mediation in itself implies dismemberment" (La fonction de médiation, par elle-même, implique l'écartèlement).[54] This surprising and rigorous statement does not go into details of the ritual dismembering, as exemplified in Dionysian sacrifices, but assumes their historical reality; above all, it identifies their inverse potential, which is present in Jesus from the start and fully realized in him, as a constitutive movement of every objectual dimension whose point of departure is precisely the never to be forgotten, re-membered destruction of its original object, its *obiectum.* In John this is all presented as done and

willed by the Mediator himself, closing the circle and providing a reflection and comment on what Christ had said and done. And this complies with the ancient sacrifices of the original Judaic Covenant, concluded by passing among the severed parts of a dismembered animal, following in the wake of a more archaic sacrifice that Robertson Smith and, after him, Freud and Weil all attempted to track down. These various avenues, born of modern and ancient experience, obviously go beyond what the fourth Gospel has to tell us, but it includes them, either because the evangelist was broadly aware of them, as he was of the prehistory and history of the Judaic Covenant and the Greek debate over the One and the Many, or because they themselves contain the ancestral premises that would be discovered by modes of thought that still lay in the future. But what unifies the multifaceted historical infinitude we are investigating and provides the objectual link to bring together and coordinate all its points is the Christological experience of the Only One who, giving himself for love brought Love into being, and so became recollection, the living remembrance of the whole history of mankind.

The fourth evangelist and his school aimed to set this movement of love and salvation center stage, a movement that is also ontological and historical, while the sacraments are its *semeia.* And this is the underlying theological reason why the instituting of the Eucharist is substituted, but not replaced, by the washing of the disciples' feet, providing a performative and moral illustration of what the Eucharist represents and re-presents, certainly not to its detriment and still less taking it for granted. We can still understand the evangelist's idea of the Eucharist if we start off from the other extreme, with the figure of the disciple who refuses his master's *agape* and prepares to betray him, blinded by avarice, showing the final result of the greed of the Temple traders. The choice made by Judas repeats the treacherous murder of Zerubbabel, as the Temple episode intended to prophesy; and a dual interpretive and ontological register now emerges in the narration, which we need to keep present in both its atemporal and temporal aspects, one register corresponding to the divine and theological plane where everything is permitted and preordained by God, and the other to the human plane of historical events, darkened by incomprehension and hate, but ultimately to result in making the Light manifest and definitive.

It starts to become clear that the sacrament is not mentioned at the Last

Supper because with the Crucifixion everything becomes sacramental for the crucified, and antisacramental for the crucifiers. The first signal we receive is a quotation from the Psalms rounding off the episode of the washing of the disciples' feet: "I am not speaking for everyone: I know who I have chosen. But the scripture must be fulfilled: 'He that has eaten bread with me has lifted his heel [*pternan*] against me'" (13:18). The allusions here are stratified but perfectly recognizable. The bread is equivalent to the bread come down from heaven, whose significance as love is, however, tragically refused and results in a terrible symbolic inversion that expresses the *katabasis* of God's descent into this world: the movement upward is now sheer violence, and the washing of the feet is followed by a hostile foot raised to crush the enemy. And that is what Judas is about to do; the reversal of the chance offered by Christ of freely given love ends in an anti-Eucharist, in the morsel Jesus hands to Judas by way of acknowledging his real intentions, a morsel that becomes the *sarx* of sin and death.

The language employed here leaves us in no doubt about this,[55] and further confirms the authentic significance of the Eucharist in John. We must take care not to formalize what is a semantic allusion, requiring us to grasp its hidden intention; however, that intention becomes clear once we see it within the fourth Gospel's overall vision of Christ's mediation: a Eucharistic act performed while remaining impervious and indifferent to the love brought to mankind by the bread come down from heaven is perverted into an act of perdition. We certainly cannot rule out the Johannine school being quite literally convinced of the power of the Eucharist to cause sickness and death if taken in a seriously sinful condition, in accordance with what Paul states in 1 Corinthians 11:30 (and it is, besides, a form of self-judgment, anticipated in the two preceding verses). Also, we should add, it is one thing to talk about Paul's letters, often concerned with pastoral and pedagogic issues, adapted to suit the recipients and dealing with urgent, immediate problems; but quite another thing to consider the objectives of high Christian doctrine attaching to a Gospel, especially to a Gospel of extremely advanced theological inspiration such as John, where the *Sitz im Leben* of the community for whom the text was written has its importance but takes second place to the commitment to formulate a message universal in scope, founded on the words and deeds of Jesus Christ. The direction taken by the fourth Gospel is toward stressing the loss of the Eucharist's power to save if it is not accompanied by a

willingness to follow Christ's mediation and share his choice of love-sacrifice for others.

The foregoing justifies a contrasting reflection, not openly stated by the text but always potentially there: that even without the liturgical act, a Eucharist can be effectively occurring; and it happens when someone offers their life out of love for others. Such an audacious yet consistent consequence corresponds to the profound thinking of the fourth evangelist and transforms the whole of human history into a living Eucharist of Christ, into dismembering and re-membering him till the end of time. The love generated by Christ confers value on the sacrament that presents and re-presents it as a reality, and not vice versa, because it is the Spirit that gives life to the Eucharistic *sarx,* transforming it into redeemed and redeeming flesh. Any other view, besides contradicting the spirit of John's thinking, can only lapse into a ritualism divorced from the objectual, moral, and ontological value that ought to constitute its sole meaning, and cannot but repeat the material misunderstanding of the Galilean crowd and the deadly metamorphosis of the food at the Last Supper effected by Judas. The addition of 6:51b–58, more technically Eucharistic in character, was probably made by the final editor, restoring fragments of the original material concerning the Last Supper. It simply serves to make clear that this Christianly and Christically performative vision—in the moral and existential, and no longer magical-ritual, sense of performative—far from running counter to the value of the sacrament, requires and confirms it: inasmuch as it is the *semeion* historically accomplished by Christ once and for all, and signifies the love that substantiates it and is its suprasubstantial substance. This last step ought to prompt us to reflect on the real meaning of the later medieval doctrine of transubstantiation. The Johannine school remained of one mind on this, but its legacy has still to be harvested, after two thousand years of disputations that have transformed the Eucharist into something it neither wanted to be nor should have been, and something that is very unlike John: a sign of division and hatred, a formal—and therefore insubstantial—conditioned criterion of legitimacy and allegiance, and a metaphysical act that by now has come to be classified in casuistic and legal terms that retain no more than the empty shell of the universalism of Roman law.

Our analysis of John's theology has brought us a long way, not into unknown and foreign territory but, on the contrary, to surprisingly familiar country and yet displaced in relation to our usual coordinates, so subtly and profoundly altered that we find it hard to recognize and evaluate in a dispassionate, objective, and historically objectual way. It is as if we stand at the edge of a double-faced precipice; on one side there are the apologists defending what they deem to be the Christian tradition, on the other the polemicists who want to throw over the tradition in toto because they feel it is false and mendacious, a form of hypocritical and covertly violent ritualism to be got rid of. This brings us up against the fact that the very idea of Christian apologia has changed radically; at the present day it takes a modern kind of stance, that is, adversarial and ideological because, from the outset, it lacks the effective, spontaneously objectual mediations once capable of facing up to one another and even fighting it out in fierce conflict. But those mediations started from the datum of a reality offered to their followers, while modern mediations set out from the opposite datum, the subtraction of reality, offset by surrogates of a voluntaristic or propagandistic nature that have to be bolstered and revitalized by demonizing the enemy, destroying him in a representational rather than material sense. If we are to restore the historical and objectual significance of Christianity, we must therefore exclude every apologetic attitude, for reasons not entirely dissimilar but by no means identical to those of the first Christian apologists such as Clement and Origen. The plane on which they can be brought to converge is the phenomenological and historical recovery of early Christianity as it may have been, seen in relation to the environments in which it developed and the tradition that grew from it.

In such a perspective, this comparative investigation, aiming to reintegrate Judaism and Christianity within the religious and cultural reality of the ancient world of which they were part, supplies the third dimension that can restore their real depth to the religious innovations introduced by Jesus and developed by his followers. All other interpretive routes make it impossible to understand the central institution of sacrifice, with the hardly enviable result that the nascent Christian religion is reduced to being identified with sacrificial rites of other religious cults, a falsifying nonexistent identification; or else, vice versa, it is forcefully reduced to an unrealistic rejection of sacrifice as such, something that was never in the intentions of Jesus or the early

Christians. Only by restoring to sacrificial mediations their complete semantic and historical spectrum will we be in a position to grasp the profundity of the Jesuan and Christian doctrine of sacrifice, set out in the fourth Gospel in a maturely developed form, but still largely unexplored even today because hyperspecialized and partisan simplifications have too often prevented recognition of its fundamental importance.

Christianity's median and mediating position in the contest between *Kultur* and *Zivilisation* is thus confirmed. The Johannine school developed a particular form of Christianity in which its relationship to sacrifice is clear-cut and intentional, on purpose to subvert its meaning as necessary violence essential for establishing collective mediations and to turn it instead into self-offered loving sacrifice, through which a different mediation gets underway, a transcendent, fully incarnate mediation that guarantees an alternative mediatory dimension to human mediations, yet utilizes their logic and institutions from within. We now need to find out, by means of a layered and far-reaching investigation, how far John's ideas correspond to other lines of thought in early Christianity, to the ideas of the historical Jesus, and to the tradition that evolved from them, down through the various schools with their prolonged conflicts over church organization and dogma.

4.

# Sacrifice, Myth, and Exegesis in Christianity

## 1. The Last Supper and Jesus's Self-Interpretation

The Eucharist is a controversial and much misunderstood theme, and we have seen how surprisingly it was developed in Johannine theology. From it we learn an important point I have already mentioned, which is that the sacrament, besides originating in a ritual act performed by the historical Jesus,[1] could also have had a comparative element as an integral part of it right from the start. If that is the case, the fourth Gospel invented nothing, but only expanded and commented on what was already there.

Any decision about the historicity of texts concerning the institution of the Eucharist is complicated by the fact that they are all clearly liturgical in origin from the very earliest one, 1 Corinthians 11:23–25, where Paul adapts both language and framework to give greater authority to what he has to say to the community in Corinth. However, while on one hand the liturgical form tends to simplify and stereotype, on the other, especially in a context like early Christianity, it implies the essential historicity of what is commemorated liturgically. The wealth of our textual sources and their early date is quite extraordinary, taking us back toward the historical origin of the formulas that have come down to us. As Jeremias stresses, 1 Corinthians probably

goes back to the spring of 54, but Paul's quotation of the Eucharistic pericope reiterates what had already been said in person to the Corinthians, back in 49. Paul, in his turn, must have heard the liturgical formula in Antioch soon after his conversion, around the midforties. But the numerous testimonies allow us to go still further back: Luke records a stage of the same tradition used by Paul, in a version possibly closer to the original, while Mark gives us a version still nearer the Semitic original, whether in Aramaic or Hebrew, taking us back to the first decade after the death of Jesus[2] (who was most probably crucified in the spring of the year 30, on April 7 to be precise[3]).

These textual and philological notes suffice in themselves to show the inconsistency of positions, so repeatedly found in modern exegesis that pre-empted from recognizing the historical substance of the texts by their preoccupation with interpreting them mythographically, with Christianity's founder transformed into a redeemer who offers to sacrifice himself for the salvation of his followers, and obviously modeled on pagan mystery cults. And in fact, the usual corollary of this type of argument is that the cult of the Eucharist evolved in early Christian communities that had a Hellenistic culture, and then spread to all Christian communities.[4] But there is no documentary or textual evidence to support this. In the first place, the atoning value given it at the Last Supper is not unique and not even unusual in the context of first-century Palestine, however unusual the theological value Jesus gives it. And then, in one form or another, the custom of the Eucharistic supper appears to be common to all known first-century communities; when Paul quotes from the text of the liturgy he seems to be referring to a tradition shared by all the Christian churches rather than addressing a rhetorical *captatio* to a particular Hellenic church, though the transformation of the Lord's Supper into a formalized sacrament was most probably gradual, with significant differences from one community to another. And the diversity of those early communities of Jesus's followers provide us with a further argument in favor of the historical ground of the Eucharistic sacrament.

As Paul's experience illustrates, relations between the Christian churches were by no means idyllic (and, moreover, were never to be so), something very different from the peaceful picture painted in the Acts of the Apostles; and the major differences turned on whether or not to follow Judaic practices for purity and membership in the faith (principally circumcision and ritual rules about food). However, these divisions never affected the real memory,

the re-membrance of Jesus at the Last Supper; if there had been any basic disagreement about the liturgical formula it would have leaked out and had a prominent place, making the differences irreconcilable because they would have touched on the fundamentals of the new religious movement. But nothing of the sort occurred, and if Paul reminds the Corinthians about the Eucharistic formula it is because it was common not only to all the Pauline communities but to the church in Jerusalem as well, and Paul was to do all he could to remain united with it.

The liturgical value of the Eucharistic texts therefore demonstrates the historicity of the Eucharist, and not the opposite as those believe who contest it. Could any such text ever have taken root so universally if it had been manipulated and interpolated to serve edifying, myth-creating ends, and had not been supported by precise testimony, both written and oral, from those who were close to Jesus? Liturgical use tends to stylize and schematize the formula, but what has to be considered primarily is its motivation, and its connotation as presential commemoration and expectation of Christ, not as a mythical being, a redeemer surrounded by the aura of countless ritual repetitions, but as Jesus of Nazareth, "born of woman" (Gal 4:4) and put to death under Pontius Pilate.[5] In other words, instead of ignoring history, the Christian liturgy is grounded in it and finds its meaning in it. The cornerstone of the Eucharist is the historicity of its establishing. However, the question still to be answered is what exactly the historical Jesus intended by this action and what its purport was. Could eyewitnesses and the early Christian communities have been deceiving themselves, revising events in the traumatic aftermath of the Crucifixion and the euphoria following the Resurrection?

To answer these questions, we would first need to know if the historical Jesus foresaw his death in some way, and if he then gave it a religious interpretation that justified it in the eyes of his disciples and was in keeping with his teaching. A host of textual and contextual elements suggest that having seen the tragic end of his master, John the Baptist, Jesus was aware of the risk he ran and his possible fate and, in view of the growing opposition shown by some among his coreligionists and the religious authorities, came to foresee a violent death for himself, a possibility that became a certainty on the eve of his arrest. And if he sought figural and interpretive precedents, Middle Judaic theology presented him with plenty to choose from, from the recurrent topos

of the persecuted prophet to the Suffering Servant/Zerubbabel, down to the ecstatic martyrs in Maccabees and in apocalyptic writings. All these various precedents presented Jesus with a historical-interpretive perspective that could accommodate the various stages of his own mission up to the Galilean crisis and the decision to go to Jerusalem. We would be wrong to recognize fanaticism in this final decision, or the mechanical atonement found in the traditional interpretations of dolorism, which would have Jesus embracing an attitude of helpless complacency in sorrow and misfortune as the only remedy for human sins. It was, instead, a courageous, objective assessment of the chances his message stood of making itself heard and bringing about change: we must not forget that Jesus's standpoint was the Kingdom, an immediate ever-open possibility if his listeners would follow him. Death was never his goal, but rather the advent of the Kingdom, and he was ready to sacrifice his life to serve that end alone. With any inferior motive, his public life is hardly plausible and the idea that a religious movement was to burgeon from his words and figure becomes completely incomprehensible. In this connection, the Last Supper pericopes provide us with evidence based on Jesus's final convictions as to how his destiny would be fulfilled. However, "based" does not mean the matter is transparently clear, and in fact my observation delimits the interpretive difficulties and makes them more acute, but a solution can be reached by penetrating the fine and even glaze of the liturgical stylization.

The evidence collected by Jeremias for the interpretation that Jesus may have given of his last meal with the disciples as a Passover feast is not therefore so convincing, since it refers to later Judaic literature and to a theological-sacramental interpretation probably made by the first communities.[6] A more convincing argument suggests an analogy Jesus may have noticed in the days preceding the Passover and pointed out to his disciples: the analogy between the death he was moving toward and the slaughter of the Paschal lamb, not so much the lamb actually eaten at table as the lambs sacrificed in Exodus to ensure the safety of the Jews as they prepared for flight.[7] However, this argument by analogy remains generic and unsatisfactory since nobody, unless they are completely bedimmed, sacrifices their life for a simple analogy. It needs to be said that many reconstructions of how Jesus may have interpreted his own death have the habit of endowing him with a strong propensity to sacrifice his life for the sake of some theological abstraction (this is typical of a significant part of the German research on the historical Jesus) or some later church

scheme (and this is a typical Catholic habit), whereas Jesus's actual religious and liturgical reference was utterly concrete and was the real Passover as once celebrated in Israel, not the skillfully revised version presented by the great legend of the Exodus from Egypt. What I mean by the real Passover is the pagan sacrifice of the *molk,* the offering of the firstborn male or of the *dawid,* the king's beloved friend, to Moloch, the archaic Yahweh, still worshiped unconsciously by many of Jesus's coreligionists since they were blind to the ritual and political violence with which their God was compounded.[8] Obviously there is no question of attributing a modern type of anthropological awareness to Jesus, but we will really understand nothing of the true stature of Judaic religious thinking unless we grasp the dramatic battle that went on within Judaism to achieve a different vision of God, which implicated its own cult in violence and ideological cover-ups, no different in this from any other ancient religion. And it was precisely this basic identification that gave universality to the new conception of God emerging from this ordeal and gradually coming to definition, thanks also to the vital contribution made by Greek philosophy and (let us not forget) by Greek tragedy, too. How then might Jesus have interpreted his own death at the fateful moment of the Last Supper?

The expulsion from the Temple of the merchants, that is, of the corrupt, deviant ruling class, turns out to be a valuable interpretive key, throwing some light on the historical and religious mystery that Jesus nonetheless remains, thereby modifying our conventional representations and restoring some elements essential for our understanding. While we agree with the significance of the event as we have seen it in the synoptic Gospels, and in John in particular, we must remember we have still to examine the closely packed sequence in the synoptics, in which the event is inserted and truncated for reasons already given. Jesus could not have had a modern, demystifying view of Jewish history and certainly accepted the Bible's figural, *imaginalis* narratives as representing a history willed and steered by God. At the same time, he was conscious of what was wrong with the cult in Jerusalem and, consistent with that assumption, would not have missed seeing the similarities between sacrificial pagan cults and the violent, deviant Yahwistic cult. For him it was an unacceptable deviation from the original relationship between men and their creator, and he took it on himself to return that relationship to its true nature, through its final fulfillment in the Kingdom. In this regard

the Temple protest signifies a "revolution," in the word's ancient meaning of completing an astronomical cycle, a return to a constitutive origin,[9] and for that very reason it was not to be satisfied by correctly reestablishing the Temple cult, nor was that the performative message Jesus wanted to send: the activities he symbolically expelled were in themselves perfectly legal and conformed with existing regulations,[10] which is the unmistakable sign that his intention was to subvert the overall Temple order and its very existence as a religious institution. The significant move comes at the end of the episode, which in the fourth evangelist comes to be identified with a resurrectional interpretation: the teaching and person of Jesus are to replace the Temple. And that could mean only one thing for this courageous prophet who had taken up the cause of Zerubbabel, that is, of the lawful son of David: his very life was seriously at risk. Objectively, then, Jesus aimed to fill the vacant space concealed by the blood of countless victims of the *molk,* sacrificed to Moloch by a Judaism still a slave to its human origins. Anyone who finds such willingness to sacrifice oneself implausible, such as Sanders who describes Jesus as "a *reasonable* first-century visionary,"[11] is clearly unaware of how far a gesture of the kind, certainly very extreme in itself, enters into the mediatory logic of the ancient world, always on the proviso that the cause was thought to be worth the sacrifice. It is hard to see why historians of Christianity should find it so absurd or improbable since historians of philosophy find it perfectly normal for Socrates—though in actual fact it has to be said that just as Socrates's acceptance of death was in no way normal, there was nothing absurd about Jesus's gesture.

In this light, the Last Supper is seen for what it was, the consequence of Jesus's revolutionary acts, his coming full circle with his final journey to Jerusalem, his entry into the capital in the Zechariahan guise of a defenseless son of David, and his impassioned, self-abnegating attack on the Temple power system, which is shown to perfection in the Epistle to the Hebrews, while John actually makes it the grand opening to the public career of the Son of God. In the Eucharist, in liturgical form, Jesus condenses all his teaching, his intentionality in philosophical terms, making it become the flesh and blood of the giver and transmitting it through the Eucharist to whoever accepts it. Thus we progress beyond Jeremias and the terms of his nonetheless commendable inquiry and beyond all anemic or conventional reconstructions of what might have happened as well. Historically, too, we can take over the

same sacrificial symbolism Jesus himself did when he shaped it to suit the ends and logic of the coming of the Kingdom, stretching its dynamic and signifying potential to the very limit. The institution of the Eucharist comes in fact as a real crescendo, since the bread representing the body is broken and shared out at the start of the meal while the cup of wine is offered at its end as can be seen in the versions given by Paul and Luke, neither of them as yet reflecting the strict liturgical parallelism of these two moments. Thus the double synecdoche of bread-flesh and wine-blood is completed and made perfect, and describes the person of Jesus in its totality: physical, performative, and symbolic. And regarding this, a couple of points need to be made.

In the first place, in the accounts given in the synoptic Gospels and 1 Corinthians, Jesus himself does not eat the bread and drink the wine he is consecrating at that precise moment. This is apparent from his use of verbs in the second person plural, and simply from the way events unfold in the narrative. It was not entirely a question of the ritual fasting that he intended to observe until the coming of the Kingdom, although he evidently thought it was near at hand, considering his sacrificial self-interpretation, choosing to witness to the Kingdom *usque ad mortem*.[12] To understand why he abstained we really need to acquire a sense of the sacramental realism he had in mind when distributing the bread as his flesh and the red wine as his blood. Even among Catholic interpreters, who ought to favor realistic interpretations of the Eucharist and are usually quick to defend them in reply to Protestant criticism, these details are passed over in silence though they are far from secondary in a ritual context such as the one Jesus conceived and interpreted. An attitude of sacrificial realism, always alive in the background in antiquity and shared by Jesus, strongly suggests that he thought the bread and wine was *really* transformed into flesh and blood, by no means such a strange conviction when we consider the intermedial context of the ancient world. Such an intermedial paradigm was not seriously challenged until the sixteenth century, and although branded as superstition and magic during the subsequent scientific revolution, it nevertheless remained widely held in Europe into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Coming change in the pattern of belief was first dramatically manifested by the Protestant criticisms of transubstantiation, the medieval interpretation of the Eucharist whereby the transformation of the two species of bread and wine was ontologically real but empirically invisible. The protests found their traumatic expression

at the beginning of the sixteenth century and reveal, by contrast, what was the premodern mindset before that time, including the time when Jesus lived and died.

It would be fruitless to try to understand precisely how Jesus visualized the sacramental system he set up at the Last Supper, and it is already misleading to talk about it too theoretically since the truth of this knowledge consists in performance, in achieving specific results starting from the Father's saving mediation. Once again, we can come to some conclusion from the essential place of the liturgy in the accounts available to us. Jesus is convinced the bread, at first, and finally the wine really do become his flesh and blood through a miracle performed by Yahweh, similar to the miracles already performed during his ministry; at the same time the divine intervention in the ritual is decisive since it comes at this culminating moment. However, the transformation is not only prodigious but full of meaning, since it embodies within itself all the forces invoked by Jesus to effect change and convey his message, and so bring about the Kingdom. But they are only effective if they encounter existential and moral awareness in those they touch. This implies that the significance desired by Jesus in the name of the Father, and accepted by the recipients of the sacrament, is a fundamental part of his machinery for salvation. In more modern language, we could say that the symbolic aspect of the Eucharist is inseparable from its spiritual/intermedial, mediatory, and theological aspects and gathers all these aspects together into a single strictly historical and religious experience. This analysis is enough to show the profound theological thinking of Jesus, thinking that involved action and in the end his fully conscious acceptance of death. There is, however, another aspect to consider that adds an essential comparative nuance to what has been touched on.

The theory that the sacrificial principle of divine metamorphosis was the specific and general precedent not only for the Eucharist as conceived and experienced by the first Christian communities but also for the Last Supper as conceived and experienced by Christ is fully confirmed. This sacrificial principle was valid throughout the ancient world, appearing at its most spectacular in divinities of the Dionysian type, and was anything but unknown to postexilic and Middle Judaism since Judaism had been long and closely associated with it in ancient times. Far from leveling down and creating confusion in the manner of the old comparativism, this comprehensive

comparison evidences the real context of Jesus's ritual gesture and the necessity of understanding its specific meaning. If what has been said so far is correct, Jesus thought of the sacrament he had set up as a means that could anticipate the final celebration of the eschatological feast and propitiate the coming of the Kingdom. It cannot therefore have the same kind of significance as the Dionysian sacrifices, and yet the more we probe the Dionysian analogies, the more structural they appear. And if those analogies have remained unexplored it is for two opposite but concurrent reasons, apart from any ideological doubts or objections: classicists are acquainted with Dionysian sacrifices, or at least they should be, but usually know very little about Christian sacrifice, and vice versa, biblical scholars and theologians know about Christian sacrifice, or should, but normally know very little about the Dionysian kind. Let us try to see what emerges when what we have learned so far of these two sacrifices is made to interact.

Jesus neither eats nor drinks because it is *himself* (the pronoun deserves to be stressed) he is offering for the disciples to eat and drink: the victim neither ate nor drank because the Dionysian sacrificers ate of his flesh and drank of his blood. So, when Jesus does not join his disciples in the real or symbolic feasting, he was not simply observing a vow to abstain, a propitiatory fast, but was making a very precise ritual gesture, proof in itself that he was serious about the transformation he had already put into words. One detail, however, and it is by no means merely a detail, appears to contradict a ritually Dionysian interpretation, and that is the promise made by Jesus that he would soon eat the Passover meal with his disciples, and so end his fast sharing in the eschatological feast of the Kingdom. Even if we limited our interpretation to Jesus as the Paschal lamb, the difficulty would remain, but it passes unnoticed through the exclusion of brutal metamorphoses of pagan sacrifice from the Jewish Passover. Scholars are not aware that in following lines of research that actually amount to censorship, they take for granted that the Eucharist is mainly symbolic, with the result that in the Catholic field it devolves into nothing more than a miraculist doctrine. In order to concur in my conclusions, one only needs to take seriously Jesus's self-identification with the Paschal victim, with the victim who was actually the human victim of the *molk* and the Cainite Temple murder. We are then presented with a new enigma. If Jesus *really* does become the Paschal lamb, or is convinced of it himself, how could he reach the point of eating himself

(or even contemplate it) in the eschatological feast of the Kingdom? There are two levels to the question, objective-ontological and subjective-cultural, and I specify this to emphasize that the difficulty presents itself in the same way both in theology and in exegesis and history, and cannot be avoided.

Comparison with the Dionysian cults can give us the answer we are looking for. After he has been devoured, and therefore in no position to eat or drink himself, Dionysus is reborn as a real sign of salvation, of regained objectuality that nevertheless, in the ancient Greek vision, came before a new ritual cycle repeating the Dionysian mystery of bloody death and light-filled rebirth, thereby ensuring that the divine and human *kosmos* continued to function. Dionysus never devours himself, because ever new Dionysuses shall rise again and be devoured to ensure the permanence of the cosmic law that is the true substance of the god, and the reason why an Orphic-Dionysian text like the Gurob papyrus toward the end of its initiatory ritual can speak of "ONLY ONE DIONYSUS," with the emphasis required by its uniting and theological import substantiated by its sacrificial repetition. Nietzsche, who was its greatest champion in modern times, can throw more light on this never-ending Dionysian cycle and the different meaning it has assumed once it passed through the event of Jesus's self-sacrifice.

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What Nietzsche was hoping for with his promise of the Eternal Return was the cosmic, sacrificial cycle of Dionysus ("*Dionysus:* Philosophy of the Eternal Return"[13]). But in spite of that, in the end it came to look like a nightmare as well, a real menace, since Nietzsche knew well that the consciousness of the modern Dionysian cycle makes it structurally different from the ancient cycles,[14] and the only way to make them converge was for the herald of the Eternal Return, with his dissolving consciousness, to assimilate himself to Dionysus and so be gloriously sacrificed. Yet the result of these endeavors was the anguishing repetition of the same phrases in his last notes,[15] the tearing apart of his mind from which the philosopher tries in vain to defend himself,[16] the eternal coming back of loneliness, existential failure, lack of recognition ("no *sound* reaches me anymore—a land without rain"; "I'm the *solitude* personified").[17] The only alternative, then, was permanent rebirth, the salvation of an eternal present, evoked in Nietzsche's poem *Glory and Eternity,* a masterpiece of nineteenth-century mysticism with which he first

intended to conclude *Ecce Homo,* and really it remains its true conclusion. Current theories that see this text as celebrating the Eternal Return, and therefore the triumph of the Superman, are conventional, and consequently false. The piece is written with relentless drive, and Nietzsche says something essentially different, but nobody pays any attention to it because they all think they already know what the philosopher has to relate, when in fact it is the philosopher himself who is related by what he writes, like the utterance of a prophet, inspired by the *logos* he has received.

Nietzsche writes of being received by the "supreme star of Being" (Höchstes Gestirn des Seins!),[18] "never tarnished by no" (das kein Nein befleckt), the "eternal Yes of Being" (ewiges Ja des Sein's) that he adheres to with his whole being, but this means he is accepted by the star of Being whereas everything and everyone had said no to him, and so tarnished the splendor of existence—that is, through considering the prophet pariah of the death of God as tarnishing the splendor of their existence. Friedrich's response to the eternal Yes of the star of Being is love (as the last line says: "*because I love you, O Eternity!*"[19]) because this Yes is love, the love that makes for existence, love that *is* Being. Heidegger's inaccessible Being is overcome at a stroke, and surprisingly this Being shows itself to be the *Logos* of John, the Mediation that is with God and is God, Christianity's recovery of the God who revealed himself to Moses with the words: "I am he that is (that was and will be)." Apart from being complicated by the Semitic absence of tense distinction, this phrase simply translates into Hebrew, not so much Aristotle's Being, as Garbini asserts,[20] as the still earlier Being of Parmenides transformed into a creational and relational divinity. This eternal Yes of Being, the object of love because it is love, means that Nietzsche's poem takes Christ's redemption to itself at such a deep level that the choice itself, rejected at first but returning victorious, goes unperceived not only in its conscious representations but also by Christian interpreters who are too busy with their own conscious representations of Christ's redemption to understand the unforeseeable ways in which it works, its secret, subversive force as *Logos*-Paraclete. Nobody has ever dared even to imagine that *Glory and Eternity* is the greatest modern response to the Prologue of John, responding with the shining light of a divine Yes "never tarnished by no," unlike mankind's pitiful yeses; and I'll let you decide which definition best fits the divine Mediation of the Prologue to the fourth Gospel. In any case, the symbolic and existential strength of

Nietzsche's poem is due to his choice to confirm his own philosophy to the point of sacrificing himself, of interpreting as sacrifice what was going to happen to him.[21] Nietzsche's concealed, unrecognized model was not the Dionysus of the Eternal Return, but the Jesus of the eternal offering of himself in the Last Supper.

Quite unexpectedly, this provides some useful modern pointers toward solving the enigma of the eschatological feast Jesus had in mind when he imagined sharing an eternal, poetic Passover with his disciples.

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At the end of the Marcan account there is one particularly striking expression that refers to the blood-wine: "Truly I tell you, I shall not drink of the fruit of the vine, till the day when I shall drink it with you, new [*kainon*], in the Kingdom of God" (14:25). For Jeremias, the adjective καινὸν is a Graecism that would look odd in either Aramaic or Hebrew,[22] and must be deemed a stylistic contribution by the gospel writer; nonetheless, the fact remains that it is a completely appropriate comment and, moreover, fits in with the theological content of the other New Testament versions. *Kainon* corresponds to the Latin *novus* and expresses radical renewal with things returned to an initial state that restores their original wholeness to them. We find this same adjective, in perfect keeping with its Christological sense, in Ephesians 2:15 where it indicates the *homo novus* renewed in Christ; we find it again in Revelation 21:5 in making "all things new," a summing up of creation in Christ, and later in Origen in the Greek title of the New Testament, the new Covenant established and sacramentally mediated at the Last Supper. This eschatologically new wine is therefore all one with the person of Christ who sacrificed himself for the coming of the Kingdom, but in a definitive, fulfilled manner that ceases to be sacrificial and thus metamorphic, and returns the Eucharist to being to a meal shared with others in an atmosphere of love.

There is no sign of sacrifice being completely canceled out. Rather, it appears to be surpassed in creating the "memory" that Jesus trusts will fulfill his ritual gesture: "do this in remembrance of me [*eis ten emen anamnesin*]." Paul uses the expression for both Eucharistic species (1 Cor 11:24–25), while in Luke it applies to the bread alone (22:19). It derives from the liturgy, as the parallelism in Paul's version would suggest, but its origin could be historical since there are precise Judaic parallels, some apocalyptic in character.[23]

However, apart from the ever-absorbing question of the *ipsissima verba Jesu,* it would in any case meet the criterion of a relevant gloss. This *anamnesis* is not a subjective memory that the disciples have to revive but primarily an objective memory regarding the coming of the Kingdom, with the subjective memory of those it is destined for as its consequence. The religious, existential reality of this sacrifice, its para-Dionysian or Dionysian structure of distributing the victim's flesh and blood, done by the victim himself, the objective significance of the Crucifixion that it precedes, all this, in signifying remembrance of the sacrament, substantiates the symbolic and semantic extension of remembrance in the sense of being the real memory of the dismembering and re-membering of a consenting victim. It would be pointless to attempt to reconstruct Jesus's precise intentions in establishing his commemoration in the Eucharist and his precise ideas in formulating it, since it would mean getting bogged down in interpretive ambiguities that can only be surmounted by forcing on Jesus whatever it pleases the interpreter to attribute to him. On the other hand, there is a good deal of sense in bridging the gap between ourselves and a credible context in which Jesus took an active part, interpreted originally according to a precise plan of his, the promised coming of the Kingdom, for which he was sacrificing himself entirely.

The image of eschatological conviviality should not be taken literally but seen as permanent reciprocally loving coexistence, a fully restored relationship with all its human and affective dynamics. In figural terms, we might say that the bread becomes bread once more and the wine is wine again in this dimension, precisely because they have undergone the sacrificial metamorphosis of the flesh and blood transformed by Jesus in his loving choice and in eternal *anamnesis,* on a plane of human existence redeemed in God and inseparable from the Resurrection. The Eucharist cannot be understood without Christ's resurrection, because the flesh and blood really and symbolically present are living and remain living, which presupposes the disciples' experience at Easter; but this points to the copresence of life, unquestionably present, and imminent death that must have been part of the Last Supper as historically celebrated.[24] If, from a purely historical perspective, this could have sparked off the later experience of encountering the risen Christ, from the point of view of faith, that experience reveals and confirms what Jesus said and did at the Last Supper, and the copresence of both possibilities seems to me to corroborate my interpretation that aims at phenomenological fidelity

to what it analyzes and leaves the last word to whoever considers the content and results. In any event, Jesus completely accepts his sacrifice, and thanks to this acceptance sacrifice is overcome, surpassed by a definitive human objectuality free from all dependence on destruction and death. Jesus's love is confirmed as "never tarnished with no" and so it is able to include Dionysian sacrifice and transfigure it into an eternal life open to all, be they Jew or Gentile, seeing that the formula "for many" (*hyper pollon*) in Mark 14:24 is the loan-translation in Greek of a Semitic expression meaning "everyone."[25]

In the light of these conclusions it is of relatively secondary importance whether Jesus thought of the eschatological feast as imminent and could look on the Eucharist as a ritual commemorating an eschatology soon to be fulfilled. Since his love is entirely present and realized in the Eucharistic gesture, it encompasses the eschatological fulfillment that was to make the Kingdom accessible to all. It is in fact its complete anticipation, performatively and spiritually, in line with the tension maintained between proclamation and completion that characterizes his theology, and is developed in the fourth Gospel by its idea of realized eschatology. The Eucharistic *anamnesis* already brings us to an eternal present where our past and our future come together, it is the Eternal Return transformed to become a solid acquisition no longer subject to the cycles of ritual sacrifice; it is the definitive Yes to life that no longer draws back from itself.

But, leaving aside the theological profundities and philological difficulties surrounding the Last Supper, where the liturgical formulas of Jesus and the early communities have greatly compressed the historical element, are there any other sure and historically verifiable indications to support the idea that Jesus interpreted himself in sacrificial terms?

## 2. The Parable of the Homicidal Vine-Growers

The Gospels contain many *logia* in which Jesus makes predictions about his own fate, most of them clearly bearing the imprint of post-Paschal interpretations by his followers. Quite obviously, from a historical point of view, the Jesus who really lived could have had no precise idea of any triumphant resurrection in the flesh awaiting him after a violent death: the gospel passages that put detailed prophecies in his mouth are the fruit of the experience

and hopes of the early communities; they expected him to return soon in the *parousia,* the Second Coming, and interpreted their awareness of it in a Christological key, in the fullness of a Mediation to be lived as a single act of faith and knowledge. That is not to say Jesus could not have made very general predictions about his resurrection as the Son of man, since an eschatological resurrection was quite within his religious horizons and so supplied him with the categories for declarations of the kind, although, and still from the historical standpoint, this possibly original layer is only to be reached in terms of the apocalyptic vision of Middle Judaism. Apart from this possible intermediate case, hard to determine in any case and ultimately of little use as it is too generic (besides which, the eschatological resurrection of Middle Judaism is not the same as the resurrection attributed to Jesus), we have a more easily reconstructed case, yielding much more information, in the prophecies about his violent death, since, as I hinted with reference to the precedent of John the Baptist, Jesus most likely expected to meet a similar fate seeing the intense opposition stirred up by his teaching. On the other hand, it seems much less likely that he foresaw death by crucifixion; and yet, even such a specific prediction is not impossible when we consider that a death sentence would have been channeled through the political and legal machinery of the Roman rulers, and if there were a trial, there was a fair chance that the agonizing death by crucifixion, unhappily familiar in turbulent Judea, would be meted out to non-Roman citizens;[26] so it was by no means a remote possibility for the troublesome rabbi from Nazareth, if we exclude stoning to death and lynching, both of which he escaped on more than one occasion according to the Gospels.

Leaving aside the intriguing possibility that Jesus actually had a premonition of his death on the cross, from a philological standpoint there is no question that the Gospels may have recorded original *logia* with statements about the Christ and Resurrection added to them, while the fact that other *logia* lack later theological developments possibly means they are historical. A particularly instructive example is the *logion* about the Son of man being delivered into the hands of men, which is found in all three synoptics (Mt 17:22; Mk 9:31; Lk 9:44). Matthew and Mark complete the saying with a prophecy about the Resurrection, quite clearly added after the Easter, but Luke has no redeeming Resurrection, so there is a good chance it goes back to Jesus: "The Son of man is to be delivered [*paradidosthai*] to men."[27] It is

worth noting the parallelism of man/men that is typical of Semitic literary taste and of Jesus's own style, and the powerful connotations of the verb *paradidonai*.[28] This is a divine passive (*passivum divinum*)[29] and represents a religious choice made by the Son in fulfillment of the will of the Father; it thus acquires particular value as atonement, coinciding with the freely taken decision of the one who is delivered up, and shows an unmistakably Jesuan touch, full of theological and Christological implications but still without the developments that were to follow from the choice indicated by the verb, a choice, moreover, inseparable from the tragic nuance of betrayal. Everything is so plain, lucid, and essential that it suggests an anticipation *ante eventu,* still not widened by the Easter experience and subsequent theological reflection. At this point Jesus realizes he is going to be delivered up and betrayed, that is to say abandoned by those who now follow him so enthusiastically, but he is convinced it is the only way to fulfill the plan of the One who sent him.

This *logion* about delivering up the Son of man shows how it is often necessary to combine *ex eventu* and *ante eventu* criteria, to see if their joint application can reveal some passage untouched by later Christological development. This is the case with a parable found in all three synoptic Gospels and also in the *Gospel of Thomas,* the parable of the homicidal vine-growers, or evil tenants of the vineyard, which is remarkable for its scope and dramatic character, and even more remarkable because it is one of very few to survive the severe scrutiny of authenticity in the fifth volume of Meier's *A Marginal Jew*.[30] We will look at the version given in Mark, which must be considered the earliest, mainly on account of its version of the son's killing: in Matthew and Luke this homicide is made to fit in with the events of the Passion, while I shall consider the version given by *Thomas* later.[31] In all three synoptics the parable is spoken in the presence of the Temple authorities and follows the question asked about the authority (*exousia*) of Jesus to do these things, a question probably found in the original episode of the expulsion of the merchants from the Temple, which makes it interesting that Mark should present the parable in the form of a direct answer:

> And he began to speak to them by parables: "A man planted a vineyard, hedged it round, set up a winepress, built a tower, and let it out to some vine-growers and went away. At the right time [*en to kairo*] he sent a slave [*doulon*][32] to the vine-growers to have his share of the fruit of the vineyard.

> But they caught him, beat him, and sent him away empty-handed [*kenon*]. He then sent another slave [*doulon*] to them; and this one too, they insulted and hit about the head. He sent them another, and they killed him, and many others, some of whom were beaten and some killed. He still had one [*hena*] well-beloved [*agapeton*] son, and he sent him to them last of all [*eschaton*], saying: 'They will respect my son.' But those vine-growers said among themselves: 'This is the heir: come on, let's kill him and the inheritance will be ours.' So they seized him, and killed him, and threw [*exebalon*] him out of the vineyard. So what will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy those vine-growers and give the vineyard to others.
>
> "Perhaps you have not read this passage of scripture:
>
> 'The stone that the builders [*oikodomountes*] rejected
> has become the head of the corner [*kephalen gonias*]:
> this was the Lord's doing,
> and it is marvelous [*thaumaste*] in our eyes'?" (Mk 12:1–11)

The first phrase raises the question of how we are to understand the use of parables by Jesus, undoubtedly a historical trait in him considering its originality and systematic use, even though most of them are a theological elaboration of the synoptic authors, as is particularly the case with Luke.[33] In the Christian tradition this kind of sapiential and narrative genre became extremely successful and consolidated in the form of allegoric-moral exposition with a tendency to assimilate parables to commonplaces as if merely digested from folk tales. The Greek word παραβολή corresponds to the Hebrew *mašal* and means an enigma essentially, with a sapiential connotation that can be traced back to the Hellenic usage, though it here as used by Jesus has a popular flavor that is far removed from the ambience of Greek knowledge. If we were talking about sacrifice, it would be easy to attribute the parabolic language to a human form of expression, with its need of violent images and events, well-suited to the listeners' sacrificial mentality, as Girard understands it.[34] But such a distinction remains too exterior, besides completely ignoring the problem of historical authenticity; it postulates a Jesus tending toward omniscience and sharply cut off from his public, detached from the historical and cultural environment he belonged to. Instead, if we

think of the parable as a parabola, its geometric image, it conveys a more fruitful and real nuance of a long, oblique trajectory reaching an end result otherwise unattainable. The parabolic story is a *mythos* that contains its truth in itself, a *mythos* that learns and teaches how to interpret the historical conditions that gave it origin, seeking a mediation that is objectual in a different way, that mankind lacks but feels the need for. With the Passion this parabolic narration by and about Jesus becomes fixed; the persecution he suffers becomes the blood-stained, indelible parable of his entire ministry. The incipit that he was teaching in parables is an editorial addition made by Mark, but it means that the parable here is not just the story of the homicidal vine-growers but everything about to happen in the Passion. The notion of *parabole,* which can be linked to John's idea of *paroimia* (example, paragon, emblematic, or even enigmatic saying: 10:6, 16:25[35]), is inseparable from the typological or figural method in its dealings with the *mythos,* and from the figural vision of history that thus comes to be defined in things themselves and experienced events, in a kind of realized phenomenology.

We will start by determining the historicity and the internal meaning of the pericope, clearly positioned by Mark within a construction designed to provide an overall interpretation of the last journey to Jerusalem undertaken by Jesus (in the synoptics, the only one) and the decisive confrontation between this son of David and the Judaic rulers. The expulsion of the merchants from the Temple may be seen as the first piece of a mosaic laid in Jerusalem, a mosaic increasingly stained red, as the brutal fable of the homicidal vine-growers makes only too clear.

The Marcan parable becomes increasingly symbolic as the story proceeds until, at a certain point, it becomes impossible to take it literally (the continual dispatch of slaves, the owner's failure to retaliate, and then sending his son by way of culmination). Several touches reveal the editing hand of the writer and his theology,[36] reaching a high point with the Christological expression "one well-beloved son"; this corresponds to *monogenes* in John,[37] and confirms the presence already in Mark of an elevated Christology, setting out the uniqueness of the divine mediation implemented in Jesus. The use of *kairos* and *eschaton* is striking and accords with the concrete and at the same time allusive register characteristic of the writer; while they mark the progressive steps in the narrative, they also underpin the fact that the final decisive moment has arrived in the story of salvation.[38] Furthermore,

a conscious textual and hypotextual strategy is denoted by the reference at the beginning to the vineyard and tower of Isaiah 5:1–2 and its connection with the final metaphor about the rejected stone that becomes the head of the corner, a quotation from Psalm 118; such a strategy unmistakably shows the hand of the evangelist, without completely excluding the possibility of some scriptural reference excogitated or initiated by Jesus himself.[39] However, we should not jump to the conclusion that the episode is mostly the result of editorial work by Mark and/or his sources, not only for reasons of style but especially because of the content. If we take out the climactic "one well-beloved son," attributable to the evangelist himself, and replace it with a more neutral "his son," the text meets the criteria of an implicit Christology, since the vineyard traditionally symbolized Israel and its owner could only be Yahweh; and this embryonic Christology, lying entirely within a Middle-Judaic perspective, can probably be attributed to Jesus. The historical worth of the Marcan parable is evident if we compare it to the version in *Thomas,* thought by some to be the earliest of all.[40]

Right from the start, by omitting the departure of the owner of the vineyard, *Thomas* appears to want to strip the version given in the synoptics down to bare essentials; the detail is in fact indispensable in the narrative since the owner has to be far away, or abroad, to make it necessary to send his slaves (with a strongly social and theological overtone that has to be maintained).[41] But these material details are of no interest to the Gnostic or proto-Gnostic author of *Thomas* who is intent on getting straight to the hidden message, accessible only to those who have attained gnosis. In itself, this proves the synoptic Gospels are being put to polemic use, and there are details of terminology shared with Luke that provide further evidence of dependence on the synoptics. But more than these, the content of the version in *Thomas* carries certain implications that underscore its secondary, revised character. The text may have modified the figure of the owner tendentiously by using a Coptic term meaning "creditor" but also "usurer" to describe him:[42] this would fit in well with the negative role the Gnostics attributed to the Old Testament God, introducing an ambivalence that deprives the story of the allegorical clarity of the original version. In that case, the son sent by the owner would be unknown not only to the tenants of the vineyard, almost justifying their reaction, but also secretly to his own father who becomes the instrument of a superior, extraneous will to salvation, which is the will of the

real Gnostic God, transcendent and hidden; and in the same way the oneness of the father/son relationship, expressed in Mark by "one well-beloved son," is destroyed. The detail of the son being thrown out of the vineyard is also missing since, from the Gnostic viewpoint, his murder is only an apparent, insubstantial step in a metaphysical process of redemption in which Christ figures as a divine being, victorious and inaccessible to human violence. And so the Gnostic gospel adapts the text of the synoptic Gospels to suit its purposes,[43] with a series of changes and cuts that alter its symbolism from within. We conclude therefore that the Marcan version is to be preferred; its symbolic story complies with a Judaic kind of theological interpretation that is, at the same time, daring and original. These features are most logically explained as coming from parables devised by Jesus himself for teaching.

In order to better examine its internal characteristics, I now want to bring the embryonic Middle-Judaic Christology I have reconstructed into dialogue with the Marcan Christology. The son's role in the story is essentially passive: he is "sent" by Yahweh last of all, and so takes his place at the end of the long line of prophets rejected and killed by God's chosen people and its rulers; his mediatory preferential position lies in the absolute faithfulness expressed by the father/son relationship, a trait over and above the role of prophet; in Mark this is developed in the Christological formula of "one well-beloved son" where, besides the theological ordinal number, we find ἀγαπητόν, a significant passive verbal adjective occurring only twice more in the second Gospel, at the moment of Jesus's baptism and at his transfiguration.[44] The divine passive that first occurs in *douloi,* the (prophetic, divine) "slaves" sent by the owner to the tenants, is fully manifested in *agapeton,* the constant loving spiritual relationship with the son. He is sole son and heir, but his oneness and legal title consist in offering himself completely to perform his father's will, in accepting danger quite openly since, at this point, his life is clearly at risk; and he does so because he is loved and prepared to do anything in obedience to his father. The Christology introduced by the evangelist is as discreet as it is pertinent and has no effect on the brusque ending to the parable, the son thrown out (*ekballein*) of the vineyard and his body desecrated (12:8). This cannot but be an allusion by Jesus to his own violent expulsion by the authorities of the Second Temple. The story emerges as simple and powerful, and as something that was spoken by Jesus in an attempt to interpret his imminent fate; there is no precise indication of the

manner of the son's death, and no post-Paschal allusion to the Resurrection. In this reconstruction the final phrase about the son being killed *inside* the vineyard and then thrown out acquires particular significance, since both Matthew and Luke align the parable with Jesus's crucifixion by emphasizing that the son was killed *outside* the vineyard. This, too, is the sign that Mark records Jesus's original interpretation, when the Passion was imminent but he still had no idea of the form it would take.

Meier has made the most pertinent comment on the bitter conclusion of a story representing the whole dramatic history of Israel:

> In the final, shattering disaster in this history of disasters, the rulers kill the son and throw out his corpse, denying it burial and presumably leaving it to rot in public—the very worst fate imaginable in the ancient Mediterranean world.[45]

It is the clearest application of the criterion of the Passion as extreme realization of the criterion of dissimilarity. Meier sums up his argument for the historicity of the parable with the following remarks:

> It is inconceivable that the early church, creating this parable from scratch, would have ended this metaphorical account of Israel's salvation history simply and solely with the tragic death of Jesus, without recompense or reversal, with Jesus destroyed, shamed, and unburied, and with his enemies triumphant. From the earliest days of the church, any reference to Jesus' death in a creedal formula was regularly accompanied by a reference to its reversal in Jesus' vindication via exaltation, ascension, or (most commonly) resurrection.[46]

Here we can fully appreciate the irreplaceable role of historical-critical method at its peak of maturity, to be completed only by a wider phenomenological and historical context. Meier's procedure consists in ruthlessly stripping away all the post-Jesuan layers of tradition to detect the original nucleus of Jesus's preaching, and this must open to us the other way, that is, recovering the historically grounded thread of tradition and the ascertainable rationale of its theological interpretations, an endeavor going beyond the narrow limits of *A Marginal Jew*. Nevertheless, the very paucity of the

results concentrates on these apparently scant fragments and sends forth from them a nonmeasurable strength, showing the substantial legitimacy of the more Christological developments not in their triumphalistic aspects but in their inner import, both historical and existential, finally freed from the Kantian and Bultmannian break between the Jesus of history and the Jesus of faith precisely by passing through this very "strait gate" (Lk 13:24). The *logion* of Luke 9:44 and the parable of the evil tenants contain all that is needed for penetrating the sense of Jesus's mediation and its being rooted in his personal self-awareness, an awareness not barely existential in Bultmann's style since it is to be read against the background of Jesus's fight against the murderous system of power of the Second Temple in order to reveal the true face of the God of Israel.

Unavoidably, the final accent of the Marcan parable falls on judgment, for reasons that have to do with the question of the historical value of the conclusion. The owner will punish the multiple murderers but with no more positive conclusion than to place the vineyard in other hands and make over the contract dishonored by the wicked tenants. This is the last opening of Jesus's teaching toward a universalistic view involving the pagan peoples as well, but he still does not know how and with what results, in a kind of short-circuit centered on his very person, ready for the last challenge against the religious ruling class of Israel. This was the interpretive path followed by the fourth evangelist in his version of the cleansing of the Temple, here paralleled by the second evangelist with his skillful scriptural strategy.

Verses 10–11—taken from Psalm 118:22–23—provide an appropriate comment to the story and complete the initial images of building work carried out by the owner. The symmetry of this scriptural framing indicates the redaction of the evangelist, but before we shortly come back to that question, it is important to note that the initial construction work is inverted and has become negative—since the homicidal vine-growers have taken over the whole vineyard—and clearly signifies a new type of building, in which the rejected stone is its fundamental element.

Going back to the theological content of the parable, the story's main features correspond to the picture Jesus had of himself as the last prophet of Yahweh come to announce the joyful news of the Kingdom and exemplify a relationship of filial obedience to the Father, a relationship offered to all the children of Israel and, in an eschatological perspective, to all peoples. Meier's

historical-critical analysis is doomed to miss the overall theological frame of the parable and confines itself to the dry sequence of Mark 12:1–8,[47] without recognizing that such a harsh conclusion, devoid of any religious comment, is a logical and theological impossibility for both Jesus and his audience. More than ever Jesus is doing his job of announcer of the Kingdom, and the post-Resurrection glosses of the evangelists by no means exclude a pre-Resurrection commentary by the person concerned. In order to reach this conclusion, we only have to admit that the post-Resurrection interpretations could be the legitimate continuation of a previous interpretive layer recognizably Jesuan, and the Marcan version is the best candidate for giving us a not unreliable account of Jesus's commenting remarks.

The final punishment looks like a primitive trait, in line with several other sayings attributed to Jesus and probably authentic since they are a continuation of the Baptist's admonitory preaching. However, in Jesus we have much more than the threatening eschatological imagery of John. The punishment is now presented as the result of refusing a positive, joyful message of salvation, wickedly rejected by those to whom it is addressed, and not as punishing a failure to repent that heralds the end of time, which is bound to come in any case. While there is a recognizable theological relationship between the Baptist and Jesus, it has undergone thorough revision; all deterministic elements are gone from John's eschatological vision, transforming it into an existential and moral vision that is immediately understandable; the last word is with human free choice, without any threats since the only message coming from God speaks of his trust and forgiving patience, evidenced in the story by the absence of any legitimate retaliation by the owner. So there is every reason not to see the final punishment as a judicial matter but as the direct consequence of human wickedness: the homicidal vine-growers reap the harvest of what they have sown and are cast out as a result of their total failure to understand the Kingdom's logic of love. Retributive determinism, as it were, is the flipside of refusing to be free: the supreme divine Mediator is like a mirror that reflects back onto human beings the identity or nonidentity they decide to have. The Son acts merely as intermediary for this final revelatory process, not out of fatalistic passivity but because his obedient attitude makes him the living testimony of that divine passive utilized in the liturgy and in theology to indicate the Father's absolute and merciful initiative. In the prayer Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount,

the divine passive "Thy will be done" comes before the immediate advent of Yahweh's loving rule: "Thy kingdom come." In other words, we recognize all the hallmarks of Jesuan teaching, allowing us to conclude that the pre-Marcan version represents Jesus's own interpretation of the fate awaiting him in Jerusalem, with every likelihood he actually pronounced these words in public. The question of the story's hypotextual context remains to be examined, and also the diegetic context it has been inserted into by Mark and the other synoptics.

The analysis of the expulsion of the merchants from the Temple provides the elements to formulate an answer. The construction images in the parable seem so appropriate essentially because the evangelist derives them, figurally and scripturally, from the initial episode of the expulsion of the *lestai,* the "brigands," from the Temple; the story of the homicidal vine-growers now illustrates the real, rapacious nature of those "brigands," prepared to do anything and everything to serve their covert, wicked interests. There is an evident figural overlay between Zerubbabel, the legitimate heir to the kingdom of David, and Jesus who enters Jerusalem to similar acclaim, and appears in the parable as legitimate heir to the vineyard of Israel. The same episode, the expulsion from the Temple, supplies the *quid medium,* that is to say, the performative bridge that takes us from Jesus's choosing to enter Jerusalem to the story of the homicidal vine-growers and the imminent events it foretells. In this broader sequence, the tower built by the owner of the vineyard becomes symbolic, prefiguring another building of which Jesus, the stone the builders rejected (a strikingly effective use of the same verb as in 3 Kings 8:19), becomes the head of the corner. And this building can be safely identified with the church in the Marcan theology. But we also understand this crescendo of construction as the exegetic and hypotextual development of a single action: the replacement of the Temple by the Word and Kingdom that Jesus brings. The scriptural framework has every appearance of being the work of the evangelist, with the meditative pause created by the Psalm and the metacomment that strikes in two directions, toward what has just been narrated and what is about to be narrated.

Nevertheless, we cannot rule out the possibility of an authentic quotation of Psalm 118, perhaps only in the line about the rejected stone (Mk 12:10),[48] that the evangelist would have expanded in the initial constructive image of the tower and in the further quotation of Psalm 118:23. We should

appreciate the very ambiguity of the image of the rejected stone becoming a cornerstone: the final expression κεφαλὴ γονίας—literally *caput anguli,* head of the corner[49]—conveys acceptations both of a foundational stone, as such in a lower or concealed position, and a stone more visible than others because of its structural function. This is not only a reference made in retrospect to Jesus's destiny, but a precise allusion to another hidden/visible stone, the foundational stone of the Second Temple laid by Zerubbabel, and remained mysteriously unaccomplished. Timothy Gray convincingly defends this reading,[50] and his contribution is even more probing since he does not make an explicit reference to Zerubbabel's hidden/visible murder, and thus does not manage to give a more circumstantial explanation to his very appropriate comment: "The parable's juxtaposition of the story of the murdered beloved son with that of the rejected stone creates an explosive fusion,"[51] and to his conclusive remark: "[Jesus] casts himself as the new Davidic Zerubbabel come at the turning point of Israel's story, empowered by the Spirit (Mark 1:10; Zech. 4:6)."[52] As soon as we add this missing piece to the puzzle, this biblical hypotext speaks for itself.

In the book of Ezra devoted to the return from the exile, Zerubbabel erects a new altar (*thysiasterion* in the LXX—Ezra = 2 Esdra 3:2–3), but the joyful inauguration of the new building sounds a discordant note as many priests are weeping for the memory of the greater and more beautiful Temple of Solomon (3:12–13). This is actually another precious hint of the real unfolding of historical events without openly mentioning the dramatic cause behind the mourning of a part of the Temple priesthood. The pertinence of the psalm allusion leaves open the possibility that it was made by Jesus himself, but no doubt the evangelists, starting from Mark, further enhanced and developed the allusion according to their own narrative and theological strategies. It is difficult and even impossible to distinguish among the different layers of a single interpretive process started from Jesus's denunciation of the murderous roots of the Second Temple and complicated for the synoptic writers by the problem of how to interpret the apparently failed destruction/reconstruction of the building in the closely connected episode of the cleansing of the Temple.

We can now recognize the clever narrative strategy employed by the synoptics: they reduce the Temple episode to a minimum and spread the message throughout the whole story leading up to the Passion. Mark, followed

by the other two evangelists, has still not completely fathomed the meaning of Jesus's performative teaching at the Temple,[53] so he acts cautiously in a way that might be called scientific (a theological science, of course, since the God of Jesus is its object) and cuts out the *logion* about the destruction/reconstruction of the Temple; relocated to the interrogation before the Sanhedrin and the crowd's mocking of Jesus on the cross, it is transformed into a tell-tale textual indicator of the abyss separating Jesus from his accusers and lynchers. What in Jesus was a word of truth corresponding to a sanctuary "not made by the hands of men" becomes manifest untruth in the mouths of his enemies, not so much because of the disagreement among the witnesses before the Sanhedrin, but because of the attribution to him of the destruction he had attributed to the divine agency,[54] a misunderstanding in terms of worldly power inevitable in a morally and mentally deviant ruling class, blinded by greed and/or fanaticism. At this point we are in a position to see that the quotation from Psalm 118 is Mark's final version of the *logion* about the destruction/reconstruction of the Temple, now replaced by the church of Christ that faithfully awaits his return and holds the violent expulsion of the "one well-beloved son" to be the mainstay of its faith.

We find ourselves with one great figural and narrative expulsion from the sanctuary of the Temple that we will simplify and comment on step by step as it is delineated in Mark: (1) the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem in the guise of the meek Zechariahan Messiah, acclaimed as the legitimate representative of the "coming Kingdom of our father David" (11:10), with his entry into the Temple (11:11: "And Jesus entered into Jerusalem, and into the Temple") marking the irreversible change underway; (2) the fig tree not bearing fruit because "it was not yet the right time [*kairos*] for figs" (11:13); clearly this *kairos* is figural, the right moment is the moment of grace, and it has been lost to Israel through its hostility to Jesus; (3) the expulsion of the *lestai* from the Temple; (4) the fig tree dried up from the roots (11:20–22) to symbolize the spiritual death of the Israel that is expelling Jesus, and the following *logion* of the mountain that casts itself into the sea if ordered to do so by a believer, by someone who has experienced *pistis:* in Middle Judaism the mountain often symbolized angelic or demonic powers,[55] and can be seen here as an angelic figure that docilely obeys the followers of Jesus to fulfill his mediation, which is achieved through forgiveness, the very substance of the Kingdom of heaven, the real mountain Jesus wants moved by those that

follow him; (5) the question about Jesus's *exousia* and his counterquestioning about John's baptizing; (6) the parable of the vine-growers.

What we have here is a powerful crescendo, effectively the Marcan version of the expulsion of the *lestai* from the Temple, which both Matthew and Luke follow with slight variations. It comes to a climax in the Passion-like conclusion of the parable of the vine-growers, which anticipates and condenses the lesson of the Passion itself. The solution found in John, the Resurrection, is not yet available to the synoptic Gospels; they look to the Passion as a whole for their solution—which certainly cannot be said to be moving in the wrong direction. By way of commentary on the Passion story, they include a series of *logia* and teachings, and though the exact historical order of these is unknown they nonetheless supply the hermeneutic framework for the events about to happen. A scheme of theology in action unfolds in the run-up to the Passion; it comes to a second climax in the Last Supper and reaches a third and final climax in the Crucifixion and Resurrection. In the fourth Gospel this scheme is translated into the anaphoric theology of the Book of Glory, most memorably encapsulated as sacrament and testimony when the dead Christ's side is pierced by the soldier's spear.

This reading of the parable of the vine-growers, and of the figural and imaginal sequence within which it is placed, provides valuable historical and theological information to complete our analysis of the expulsion of the merchants from the Temple. We can conclude that Jesus interpreted the fate awaiting him in precise mediatory terms that were also necessarily sacrificial since sacrifice was the ancient world's primary reserve of symbolism and energy to fuel mediations and make them credible. He thus accepted the role of sacrificial victim but did not actively seek it in accordance with the suicidal logic attributed to him in Albert Schweitzer's essentially eschatological interpretation; instead, the idea gradually took shape in his mind as the coming of the Kingdom receded and the greatest testimony of all finally became inevitable, devised in line with the intermediating and intermedial significance of the Servant of Yahweh that was in turn modeled on the traumatic, treacherous killing of the last rightful representative of Israel's monarchy.

The institution of the Eucharist sums up this course of events, and its historicity is confirmed by its rich symbolism and performative significance, a visible sign that Jesus had thought long and deeply about the matter. To start with, he has no hesitation in applying its Judaic and pagan terms of

comparison to himself, with surprising consequences, at this most critical moment in his career, his *kairos,* correctly interpreted by his followers as a moment of Grace, but we should not overlook the human and dramatic aspect of what was an extreme theological and existential choice. Certainly, all this must sound very foreign to modern man, with his loss of mediations and the objectual void created in him by the collapse of the intermedial and *imaginalis* machinery that kept a way open between heaven and earth, between annihilation and salvation, in the ancient world. The results of the investigation look so remote and different that there is a danger they will be lost as soon as they appear, making it advisable to go right through with it if we really want to engage in a profitable dialogue with the present. Otherwise, we find ourselves stalled by some statement to the effect that it is all extraneous, such as Schweitzer's inquiry concludes, where Jesus is made to look like a fanatic anxious for religious palingenesis, to be brought about by sacrificing himself programmatically. If that were the case, the antithesis it was hoped to overcome would reemerge completely and more intensely, the antithesis between the Jesus of history and the Jesus of faith, between the phenomenal Jesus and the noumenal Jesus. In short, interpretation has to be taken all the way: to break off halfway or even just before the end would mean losing everything.

So we need to verify more precisely what sacrifice meant in Jesus's day and in his particular environment, the understanding he started from in working out his final choice. In other words, we need to reconstruct an entire logic of sacrifice and a corresponding language, whose contours the modern reader fails to see. And that raises the question of how we are to approach the gospel texts that talk about sacrifice, and Bible texts in general, in a way that respects their internal characteristics and, at the same time, draws reliable information from them, thereby setting up an open dialogue with the modern interpreter consulting them. The remarks made earlier about method apply here, too, in addition to what has since been learned about the context and subject matter. With regard to these themes we need to define an approach to the scriptures that is contextual in a modern way, and the premises and consequences of that are far from being simply methodological, since they involve not only our view of sacrifice but also of myth, the very first way in which sacrifice was expressed and explained. In other words, we need to exploit and develop our modern interpretive resources to the maximum in

order to interact with the historical phenomena that they must help us to identify and explain, avoiding the opposite but symmetrical pitfalls of unreal idealization and crude reductionism.

## 3. Hermeneutic Difficulties

A comprehensive hermeneutic approach is fundamental, since it is inconceivable for difficulties on this scale to be dealt with using a specialistic approach to single texts or authors. Not that specialistic study is unnecessary, but that it needs to be carried out within a wider awareness of the historical, theological, philosophical, and anthropological aspects, and without the one-sided or improvised applications that make one yearn for less ambitious studies that at least serve to clear up certain single aspects. In this connection, Girard played an innovative role, by the way that he made the Judaic and Christian scriptures his chosen field to expound his anthropological and religious vision of sacrifice and myth. So this is the right moment to look at his interpretation of the Bible and Christianity, which can also point us in the right direction.

My analyses of the parable of the homicidal vine-growers partly confirm the relevance of Girard's observations that make Jesus the central figure as scapegoat, as the innocent victim who brings to light all the victims killed "since the foundation of the world."[56] Adequate emphasis is given to this parable and to all aspects of the gospel narratives where reference is made to victims killed in sacrifices and disguised by the transfigurations of mythology, including the final full revelation of the Passion. Girard's exegetic procedure is extremely realistic in regard to anthropology and scripture and focuses on the essential nucleus of the victim, the very foundation of human history; and this enables him to recapture, with thoroughly modern overtones, a typological approach that is both theological and historical, and not so very remote from patristic and medieval exegesis, though that appeared to be dead and buried under the attacks of modern skepticism and the historical-critical method. Not a few passages and pages in the Old and New Testaments are given a breath of new life by Girard's method, proof of a hidden truth that is the truth of the human world and also of the divine, the only divine capable of victoriously standing up to the objections of

modern rationalism, thus demonstrating its inadequacy and dependence on schemes that remain irremediably persecutory. His comments on the episode of Christ and the woman taken in adultery display his powers of cognitive clarification at their very best. The pericope comes very late in the Gospel of John—but it is very ancient[57]—and makes quite clear Jesus's ability (the difficulty in understanding the passage suggests its historical origin) to defuse the perverse mechanisms of the *skandalon* and of the resulting persecution. Certainly, there was a moralistic reluctance among early Christians to accept this episode as authentic, despite its antiquity, and therefore to include it in the text of the Gospels, and perhaps the only reason it made its way into John was its special consistency with the Johannine theology (and we might take into account the further conjecture that it was originally there).[58] Their sheer reluctance proves how far the tradition has been from tamely complying with Girard's antimythic description of Christianity, something that has been continued by moralistic misconceptions that still preempt many Christians from understanding the episode's message.

There are more facets and complexities surrounding the birth and history of Christianity than Girard's attractive simplification would suggest; and in the end it obstructs the cognitive access achieved by his breakthrough work in epistemology and hermeneutics. Girard's interpretive style is confrontational and polemical and absolutizes in modern terms religious conflicts whose original meaning was different because they arose not from the want of reality typical of today's mentality, often only too ready to mistake its own lack of references for openness, but from a fullness of experience and meaning. With time these conflicts translated into positions that were sometimes controversial but were the outcome of a truth revealed from on high and manifest in itself, emanating with an entire vision of the world because it was that revelation that founded and defined the world. In other words, Girard underestimates or ignores the mediatory and objectual dimension of the Bible texts, in every way the dimension Jesus belonged to, no less than his early followers. It is easy to see that mediation is the true core of the parable of the homicidal vine-growers, since what dominates the scene is not an anthropological, intramundane mechanism of violence but the tenants' rejection of God's saving mediation, which means that the diabolical forces opposing the Kingdom prevail, and as a consequence of that, that Jesus elects to take the place of the son of the legitimate owner in order to rout them. The

centrality of the mediation in no way sets Judaism or Christianity above the rest, as if they were islands of truth emerging from a tempestuous sea of disregarded persecutions; on the contrary it highlights a common basis, a generating process shared by all human cultures in which the Judaic-Christian tradition has discovered its path to knowledge through increasing objectual awareness. There is no conflict with other religions and cultures since it realizes a tendency apparent in all of them, and realized by all in their different ways and different degrees.

Girard's adversarial schematism is forced to attribute all knowledge and perfection to the Judaic and Christian tradition; all the evident violations of this total monopoly are passed over in silence or minimized or, at most, put down to man's dumb opposition to the Good; rather than the result of detailed historical analyses, this appears to be the automatic application of a theory. And conversely, all violence and hypocritical bloody concealment is necessarily attributed to every other human culture, and the countless examples that evince their profound knowledge in this regard are silently passed over or minimized. This is also the case with the spiritual and moral achievements that every human civilization possesses; and in any case, inasmuch as it is civilization, it marks a symbolic, value-based rupture with the blind brutality of nature, red in tooth and claw, and the tyranny of biological adaptation. One corollary of this process is that the almost universal tendency to substitute human victims with animals and eventually with offerings and simulacra is of necessity traced back to the stratifications of persecutory misrecognition. In Girard's view, this makes the cultures that use it objectively more and more hypocritical, as if sacrificing animals instead of humans did not mark objectual progress in the perception and life of ancient cultures. If we just ask ourselves about the origin of the concern for the weak and downtrodden that shines through the finest pages in the Bible, we immediately realize such concern must have been an extremely long historical process fraught with vicissitudes.

The final outcome of this theodicy of the victim is that Girard, having attributed all, or almost all, sacrificial awareness to the Judaic-Christian tradition, has to concentrate it ahistorically in the person and teaching of Christ, since the tradition by itself will not bear the weight of demonstration that the apologist would load onto it. In this way Girard implicitly obtains a Jesus whose knowledge accords entirely with the mimetic theory of his

commentator two thousand years later, and he makes Jesus alone alien to sacrifice and sacrificial mediations so absolutely as to be historically impossible, leaving him to a theological monad devoid of any real contact with his formative cultural and religious environment. Thus it is that Girard projects onto Jesus his own interpretive criteria, a distortion neither surprising nor unusual in itself, but something we must keep in mind.

As with all great religious and historical mediators, the figure of Jesus possesses the overdetermined power of reflecting different needs and interpretations, adapting to them with great flexibility since, to some extent, his function over the centuries has been to channel and direct the expectations and hopes of multitudes of people looking to him for answers and assurances. It should also be noted that such a process is no different in itself from the way myths are created and developed, and its overall value depends on the resulting degree of objectual vision and realization. In other words, every *mythos* brings with it essential cultural and objectual achievements and, conversely, the figure of Christ, for Christianity the unique Mediator and Revealer, also complies with and exploits the same processes of codification and cultural transmission. Thus there is no absolute antithesis between myth and revelation, because every myth was originally a revelation, and every revelation must follow the processes of myth if it is to be accessible and representable as well as historically effective, that is, in other words, if it is to mediate with success. It involves verifying the level of objectuality and transitivity achieved by a mediation, and with regard to that there exist no essential distinctions or priorities, because everything depends on the objectual functionality attained by a mediation in a precise context at a certain time in history, with all the possibilities for regress that threaten in every human achievement. Just as the bloodiest myth-rite can serve an indispensable civilizing mission at the time of being established, so the most spiritual and objectually advanced revelation can turn into a falsifying, disguising myth the moment it falls short of the objectual and humanizing ends that inspired it. In the words of Jesus in the synoptics, speaking of those who would speak and act in his name: "By their fruits you shall know them" (Mt 7:16), that is, by the objectual value of the Christic mediation they offer, without formal, external guarantees to safeguard against degeneration and drifting into antiobjectual positions.

There is therefore no Mediator who exempts human beings from the

effort to understand what a mediation means in the particular historical context they inhabit, and this is eminently true of the Jesuan, Christic, Christological, and Christian Mediator; in its variously stratified composition, it presents itself as the historical and human messenger of a transcendent, divine mediation with which it forms one whole. This is tantamount to saying that the Christian mediation, in the objectual developments it brought, far from relieving us of the task of understanding its significance historically requires it in fact, a necessary consequence once the freedom inseparable from acceptance of the Kingdom has become a permanent human acquisition and an irreversible datum of our culture. That being the case, we can make it our task to find out more exactly what the historical Jesus understood and experienced as mediation and compare its results in relation to other mediations of his day. From a philosophical, scientific, and even theological standpoint, Jesus detached from his context and absolutized as a theoretical extrapolation or datum of faith is not really credible for modern man. This is because the objectual effectiveness of Jesus today no longer consists in being a sacral, theological, and metaphysical chrysalis, valid as long as the collective conditions making it credible remain in place—which is what Christianity has been, with all that that entails—but in being a frontier ever open toward divine and human objectuality, starting from the real historical experience of men and women, including the rabbi of Nazareth whose position is central but not isolated, and certainly not unrelated.

The constructive metaphor of the rejected stone in Psalm 118 proves to be useful also from the viewpoint of modern hermeneutics. The ambiguity of the *kephale gonias* (*caput anguli*) is also its greatest resource. The stone rejected by the builders is not going to become a mythical kind of foundation but the head of a corner, where the finally prevailing connotation is of a structural element plainly visible to all whose function lies in being set between other stones, thus making construction possible.[59] But what exactly is visible? We come back to the question about the role and meaning of sacrifice as regards both Jesus and ourselves.

How then might the living Jesus of history have interpreted his destiny, with reference to the religious mediations he believed in? Put this way, the question as a whole makes it clear that only sacrifice offered him an adequate means of interpretation, with Middle Judaism providing a host of figures interpretable and interpreted in a sacrificial sense, from the Suffering

Servant/Zerubbabel of Deutero-Isaiah down to the last dramatic example of John the Baptist. Two observations need to be made at this point in order to avoid modern distortions in interpretation.

The first is that Jesus, like Judaism and antiquity as a whole, was not opposed to sacrifice in principle, as a single, unified religious institution and abstract concept that could be used to describe and explain. All cultures in the ancient world, including the Jewish, saw the act of sacrifice as powerfully charged, communicating with superhuman forces and in itself a superior and formidable force, so much so that verbs are often used to describe it or nouns with performative, verbal value. The sacrificial act is a terrifying, portentous event, and the light that comes from it—bright or grim as the case may be—is so intense it cannot be looked at too closely and assimilated to some unifying abstraction, which is why there is often no one term to describe it.[60] Every type of sacrifice has its characteristics, particular powers, and links to a time and a place. Ancient Judaism and ancient Greece provide eloquent examples (as much could be said for the comparable examples of Zoroastrianism and Hinduism) since both played a major part in the history of ritual. For that very reason, however, they developed a critical attitude to human sacrifice; but it never became categorial, extending to all sacrificial rites, as modern abstract logic would have it, ignoring the dramatic situations for which those rites had to give a concrete response.

The Bible records various episodes where human sacrifice, as long as it was ordered by God, was theologically and ritually valid. These transmit a memory of the *molk* as we see, for example, in the much-discussed sacrifice of Isaac, not simply a divine excuse for putting Abraham to the test since eventually a sacrifice had to be made *in any case,* but a sign that the act of sacrifice itself established contact with God and deflected his wrath, a sign, if circumstances required it, that human sacrifice was preferable to a sacrificial *vacatio.* Moreover, in opposing pagan sacrifice, the prophets recognized the power of the act but rejected it because it was addressed to the wrong divinities and involved acts of cruelty such as human sacrifice. The Bible inclines toward rejecting human sacrifice not because it is sacrifice but because it is a cult act directed toward the wrong divine mediations. These could be called antiobjectual, initially according to the universal rule by which any mediation differing from one's own is a destruction of the object, and later, once Judaism had interacted with the ideas of Plato and Aristotle, according to

ethical and spiritual criteria that then became clear and brought the monotheistic mediation increasingly into focus, where the sacrificial act is not consigned to the past but concentrated and theologically spiritualized.

The second and related observation is that since all forms of sacrifice are governed by this same performative, transforming power, we must not absolutize and force the opposition between one type of sacrifice and another, or between one mythical-ritual or theological interpretation and another. This more general circumstance is ignored by many interpreters today who follow a fashion for analytical distinctions intended to show that the Eucharist, or some original form of it, has no atoning or substitutive value. Besides being suspect textually and taking passages out of context or disregarding how they are related one to another, these distinctions also ignore the power of sacrificial rites to implement, a power recognized at all stages in ancient history. And a power, it should be added, fully acknowledged by Christians in the early centuries when they refused to sacrifice to the emperor or perform ritual acts equivalent to sacrifice in their eyes, so that they went to their deaths as martyrs. If the Christians had thought pagan sacrifice worthless, their choice of death would be incomprehensible. Clearly, they were intimately convinced that to submit and sacrifice would be an unforgivable breach of faith, quite literally a fornication with idols that betrayed their Christic mediator and contaminated them with the devil's intermedial means, to which they would have become hostages. Therefore, the only condition to ensure objectual salvation, to defend the one true life, was to die in the body and be transformed into the furtherance of Christ's unique, definitive sacrifice.

Bearing in mind the approbative passage from Origen's *Contra Celsum* on "one just man, prepared to die of his own free will for the good of the community,"[61] let us read what Martin Hengel has to say about this, in his now-classic study of the Crucifixion, which remains highly pertinent:

> The theme of atonement, as "purifying the country" from evil and disaster, or in the sense of "propitiation" to appease the anger of the gods, was part of the *lingua franca* of the ancient religious world. Particularly striking in this context are the many points of contact that can be shown to exist between the ideas of the Old Testament and those of ancient Greece. In the Graeco-Roman world in particular, the theme of expiation was often connected with a human sacrifice "in the sense of an extraordinary atonement." . . .

> Furthermore, certain forms of death penalty also had sacrificial features to them.[62]

This reflection is highly pertinent and explains plainly what paganism, Judaism, and Christianity had in common. Only the last statement is too scholarly and cautious, since we can safely add that all the forms of death penalty had sacrificial features and origins, though some of them displayed this more than others, as we shall see when we analyze the Roman crucifixion. In any case, the ritual language common to the whole ancient world ("the *lingua franca*") not only provided a sort of basic symbolic language shared by all the societies of the Roman Empire, but was also the best ground for further cultural and religious exchanges. The points of contact between Judaism and paganism were even more numerous through the cultural and cultic intertwining that we have observed and, with the growing number of pagan converts, they intensified among Christians in the first centuries, evincing thereby a common prehistory and history that Middle-Judaic differentialism had tried to erase. This fact has important repercussions on our reconstruction of how Jesus might consider sacrifice and apply it to his own mission and destiny.

Hengel was writing at the time of the Bultmannian and post-Bultmannian research into Jesus; the earlier research, bent on reaching the Jesus of history, had often come to see him as deluded or fanatical, while this twentieth-century phase sought to restore the Jesus of faith through a process that set him in opposition to Judaism and was often dictated by prior theological convictions. By way of reaction to this, the more recent work set out to prove that Jesus was in every respect a Jew of his time, which is true enough in itself but overlooks the dramatic history of Judaism, or rather of Judaisms, and ends by blunting or eliminating the original elements his preaching must have contained, thereby justifying his crucifixion for those who approved of it. These various excesses have to give way to more balanced views that combine all the factors, similar and dissimilar, in such a way as to carry the unmistakable hallmarks of a distinct personality, one capable of inspiring and nurturing a religious tradition destined to break away from its Middle-Judaic matrix within a few decades. It is not a question of getting back to an original existential *kerygma* uncontaminated by myth or ritual; or referring to a mysterious choice to donate one's life in atonement; or of

appealing to a Resurrection that, reduced to the terms of a final residual miracle, ends by evidencing disbelief rather than faith; or of instilling Jesus with a putative antisacrificial and demythologizing essence contrasting with the whole of human culture and history. There is no apparent reason why a remote portentous event should express more faith than a humble familiar act, such as caring about other human beings and forgiving the inevitable limitations in all human relations; and therein, as the profound doctrine of the sacraments in John teaches us, lies the essential starting-point of Jesus's salvation, or rather of his loving mediation toward every objectual aspect of human life. That is why faith, the act of *pisteuein,* of entrusting oneself to him, letting oneself be mediated by him, is either objectual or it is not. And it is within that vision that all historical and philosophical considerations can be developed according to the given phenomena and a consistent explanation of them, without being anxious to isolate, or vice versa to confute, a mysterious "moment x" of faith, since the aim is to clarify and fathom the objectual meaning of the Jesuan, Christic, Christological, and Christian mediation, with its many and varied layers that remind us of its being far from monolithic in character, and also of the linking, underlying theme that can be recognized and reconstructed.

With these observations we are in a position to sum up the Eucharist comparatively so that its centrality and potential meanings can be understood. There are good reasons for attributing its establishment to Jesus, in the form of a liturgical companionship at table to which he gave a unique, original interpretation that is indissolubly linked to his figure and mission. Those reasons can be listed as follows: the antiquity and unanimity about the Eucharistic supper, satisfying the criterion of testimony by various sources (Paul, the synoptics, and the fourth Gospel, not to mention other ancient Christian sources); the criterion of discontinuity, since Jesus's gesture follows a sacrificial dynamic unacceptable to the mentality current among his coreligionists at the time; the connected criterion of contextual continuity, since the Judaic tradition contains scriptural and cultual antecedents for the details of the Eucharist; the criterion of consistency with all we reliably know of Jesus's teaching; the criterion of the Passion, because the sacrament tells us how Jesus interpreted his imminent destiny and how far he had grown apart from the Judaic ruling class. Added to these reasons there is the comparative argument, showing a similarity in structure to pagan sacrifices but with an

objectual significance opposed to them since the aim here is to transform the violent constriction of sacrifice, thought to be the only way to restore the divine mediation, and turn it into a coextensive but alternative divine mediation, thus inverting the violent necessity so as to make it an offering of love. This comparative argument can take a weak form, if we narrow it to the "*lingua franca*" of sacrificial atonement Jesus may have adopted to serve his ends; or a strong form, on the assumption that Jesus started to think in these comparative terms and knew how far the Judaic cults resembled and intermixed with the surrounding pagan cults. This second hypothesis is more consistent with the awareness we can attribute to Jesus regarding the concealed crimes of the Temple cult, and also with the metamorphic and para-Dionysian symbolism utilized in accounts of the Eucharist, becoming more openly Dionysian in John.

Our explorations so far already give us a satisfactory answer as to the type of mediation worked out through Judaism, Jesus's own ideas, and the religious reflection he then inspired. Sacrifice as a source of mediation was an integral and fundamental part of these developments; its theological and moral reworking led to new discoveries about human and divine objectuality, and to a concern for history and historicity that modified the sacral and cosmic mediations of antiquity from within. To assess the original contribution of Judaism and Christianity there are still other related but no less essential points we must examine, since without them our idea of their historical importance and influence would be inadequate.

We are speaking of sacrifice in the biblical texts, but the problem is to ascertain to what extent we can make a historical use of them. The first point concerns the legitimacy and reliability of the sources: how far can we rely on source texts for the information we need, in view of the manipulation evident in their editing and transmission?

## 4. Manipulation for Propaganda Purposes

Could the Bible have some distinguishing feature, marking it out from all other texts? Or is it, as many scholars see it, a palimpsest of texts and strata, often differing greatly one from another if not actually heterogeneous and contradictory and all held together by theological, political, and ideological

assumptions? Certainly, as the product of specific historical conditions, with demonstrative aims that would nowadays be bluntly defined as propaganda, the Bible is that *as well.* Some examples taken from both the Old and New Testaments will illustrate this.

Let us start with the first five books of the Bible grouped together as the Pentateuch. After the highly figural/*imaginalis* beginning with the creation of the world and man, the theological and narrative structure of the Pentateuch follows a grandiose double movement: Abraham from Ur of the Chaldees to Palestine and Moses from Egypt, where Jacob's descendents had been enslaved, to the Promised Land Yahweh has prepared for them. But none of this actually took place as described in the Pentateuch, in spite of endless speculative attempts to reconstruct it. The Pentateuch as we have it, as Spinoza so acutely understood, is the outcome of editorial work on a huge scale during the Hellenistic period; this took earlier editions and texts and set them within a historical and theological framework that was widening out, partly because at that time a more explicitly monotheistic theology was starting to be worked out under the influence of Greek philosophy. The east-to-west movement of the return from the Babylonian exile to Palestine was transformed into the saga of Abraham and projected back into a distant, founding past that could make Yahweh's manifestation to Abraham an originating event and so give his descendents title to the land they claimed by divine mandate. However, this first part of the Bible saga appears quite artificial because it utilizes the earliest geographical and historical coordinates then available, coming from the period of the Persian domination, and strips them of their more anachronistic features; as a result, the narrative is simplified, leaving the stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and his sons in a sort of vacuum.[63] Fuller development was therefore required to give some historical foundation for the theology of the pact that played a strategic part in the development of monotheism, and the need was supplied by the brilliant narrative fresco of the Exodus from Egypt. I ought to mention that I am not laying down specific timelines here but trying to make clear the logic behind certain developments in theology, history, and literature that have engaged generations of thinkers and writers.

Telling the Exodus story meant unraveling and reworking real historical events, with the advantage that full use could be made of mythical-ritual and legendary traditions coming from the various tribes that had created the

two preexilic kingdoms. There had been domination by the Pharaohs, but it occurred in Palestine not in Egypt, and it had seen the Jewish tribes gain their independence, somewhat unexpectedly, following the collapse of the Egyptian empire at the end of the thirteenth century BC. The Egyptians left their mark on the Judaic religion; the archaic Yahweh took on the inscrutable and inaccessible features of the prestigious, distant figure of the Pharaoh.[64] Freud, in an otherwise fanciful reconstruction, was not completely wrong to link Jewish monotheism to Egypt. And his instinct is sure when he sees Moses as a preexilic figure originating in myth and legend, possibly a combination of several mythical figures whose deaths were all the result of collective violence: in fact at least two episodes originate in myth, the episode of the waters of Meriba (Ex 17:1–7; Nm 20:1–11) and the related episode of the death of Aaron (Nm 20:22–29), both pointing to ritual or ritualized killings. The only logical explanation of the episode at Meriba is that Moses, or better someone in place of him, was stoned to death and then commemorated as a legendary lawgiver. Aaron's death, however, looks like a regular ritual act in which a priest-figure, having reached the end of his mandate, was taken up a mountain to be killed. The details of the episode are eloquent and were duplicated and enlarged upon in describing Moses's death on a mountain before the chosen people reached the Promised Land. Moses thus consists of at least two figures: a mythical lawgiver stoned to death by the people who comes back not as a divinity but as the founder of its politico-religious identity, and a priest (or a sacred king if the mytheme derives from a ritual of the *molk* type) who was regularly sacrificed on a mountain either at the end of his mandate or if a particularly serious crisis arose, such as the one recalled in the episode of the worship of the golden calf, which dramatizes the ritual stage of Yahweh's veneration in bovine form.[65] Here, too, the logical explanation is the killing of an impotent leader to solve a collective crisis, and the story duplicates this figure in the dual character of Moses/Aaron. The unprecedented collective punishment meted out by Yahweh to bring the rebellious people back into line is a typical mythical reversal of collective violence, where the community itself dies en masse, as for example in Noah's Flood.[66]

And at least some mention must be made of the most sensational textual and historical episode covered up by the Bible but transmitted through its palimpsests: the murder of Zerubbabel by Joshua, which is recorded in

the book of Zechariah but in an arbitrary and incomplete form. No event more than that murder seems both to confirm and disprove Girard's theory that the Bible is the only place to defend victims, since the entire postexilic culture was founded on a terrible crime, and the political motives that determined the final edition of Zechariah were powerful enough to prevent any open revelation, so that it lamely takes its place in a grand editorial patchwork having features of myth, legend, and propaganda. At the same time, the memory and traces of the murder have been tenaciously transmitted by the Bible texts, starting with the figural account of the fratricide of Abel/Zerubbabel by Cain/Joshua. It would therefore be a serious mistake to reject the whole biblical machinery as deceptive and exploitative, precisely because it was the result of a necessary compromise between the power-holding caste and the priestly minority that would not bow to its logic of oppression and power. This was the real remnant of Israel, bearing witness to its hidden greatness, and whose legacy was handed down over the centuries to be taken up in the words and deeds of Jesus of Nazareth. And this tenacious hold on the memory of an ancient crime of origin was also perfectly intuited by Freud; more than ever he proved to be a child of his own people in fearlessly uncovering the traces of an ancient murder that had been concealed but not completely erased, a crime of origin redeemed by its disclosure and by the sense of release it brought to the conscience.

All this implies redefining our categories of classification and interpretation since, while we must beware of taking the Bible texts as God's own truth, we must be just as careful not to take them for mythical texts identical to all the rest. We have established, for one thing, that mythical texts are not to be written off in a strictly rationalistic sense, as they represent humanity's first attempts to explain itself in narrative form. However, the point about the Bible is that it affords the singular sight of a class of texts closely interrelated with the myths at their origin and, at the same time, able to utilize and rework them within a framework that is beginning to be historical; as a result, a new frontier in representation and objectual knowledge is obtained. But before going ahead with this, we will look at the example I have chosen to illustrate the further class of texts that emerged from Middle Judaism and went to make up the body of Christian scripture.

Those Christian texts, in fact, most obviously give the appearance of propaganda where they touch on Christianity's difficult relations with

Judaism, a difficulty seized on by modern ideologists to accuse Christianity, and the Gospels in particular, of anti-Semitism. This trumped-up and oft-repeated charge is out of context on two counts. Firstly, it confuses the anti-Semitism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a pretotalitarian or totalitarian ideology, with a tradition of anti-Judaism found in many Christian countries; however, this attitude of prejudice and persecution existed in a context where the different sections of society were protected by a series of precautionary measures, giving the Jewish minority certain prerogatives and a limited field of action.[67] Secondly, it confuses Christian anti-Judaism with controversies occurring in the first and early second centuries that often found one Jew pitted against another, and so were without any of the ethnic or denominational connotation dating from later times. Indeed, this two-way struggle gave rise to Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism as we know them.[68] It is important to get this doubly anachronistic charge out of the way; at the same time, admittedly, the early Christian texts go some way to encourage it, as we shall now see.

Following the disaster of the first Jewish war, the gospel writers were faced by the pressing problem of how to present Christ's message in a manner acceptable to the Roman authorities. Thus we find historical data manipulated from the very start that along with the markedly theological and nonhistoriographical interests of the first Christian testimony and writers, helps to explain why our historical information about Jesus is so incomplete. Doubly manipulated, since there is negative alteration, editing out whatever might prove embarrassing over the years, and concomitant positive alteration, making changes to the actors at the time of Jesus to suit the situation decades later. The first, negative manipulation is quickly told. The Christian writers erased or concealed large slices of the turbulent Judaic microcosm prior to the events of 66–70 AD—above all else, the fundamentalist and nationalist elements that theorized religious and/or armed resistance against the Roman rulers, and put it into practice. Our analysis of the expulsion of the merchants from the Temple proves that Jesus actually came up against positions of this type, and there is further proof in his shying away from any attempt to proclaim him as a Messiah of a politico-religious type, which is a recurrent theme in the Gospels starting with his temptation in the wilderness. The final outcome of his preaching depended on this dangerous confrontation, but no direct traces of it remain. This circumstance

gave rise to the idea that Jesus was in fact a nationalist whom his followers transformed in hindsight into an inspirational preacher of universal peace.[69] This notion turns up repeatedly in modern studies, starting with Reimarus, but is without foundation since the announcement of the Kingdom of God lies at the heart of Jesus's preaching. Nonetheless, it is interesting to note how Christian writers felt the need to root out any association of their master with anti-Roman movements, but for exactly the opposite reason, that is, to stop people from thinking Jesus had anything to do with the more violent and fanatical sectarians. In other words, inadvertently the evangelists found themselves faced with a communicative double bind unwinding through time since, in order to avert dangerous suspicions in the immediate present, they sowed the seed for doubts that arose many centuries later. In any event, the picture that emerges is seriously affected by this: it totally ignores the Essenes, for example, a large-scale movement with many off-shoots, including the Qumran community as an extremist fringe, and, similarly, makes only veiled references to nationalists who wanted to fight Rome by pronouncing anathemas and/or taking up arms. Designations are correct but generic, such as scribes and priests, as well as the better-known or indeed notorious category of the Pharisees.

We lack detailed information about the Pharisees,[70] and what little we know about the ideas of this religious and political faction suggests they could have engaged in fruitful dialogue with Jesus. They, too, believed in resurrection, and their position was not as ritualistic as the Gospels would have us believe, since they held it as fundamental that practice of religion be accompanied by an elevated moral attitude toward one's neighbor (albeit a Jewish neighbor, and not a Gentile). Of all the various factions in Middle Judaism, they came closest to Jesus. The Sadducees, on the other hand, could be criticized for their ritualism, governed by strict rules where it was not simply a matter of appearances; and the Essenes too, at least as far as their most radical off-shoot, the Qumran community, was concerned. The end result of all this is a remarkable example of heterogony of ends where diametrically opposite causes led to a single historical change.[71] The Pharisees were in fact the only religious party to survive the catastrophe in 70; they detached Judaism from the Temple cult and thus from the associated sacrificial rites, gathered up and reorganized its scattered threads, and set up the structure of synagogues and rabbis that became definitive for the Jewish religion in

the second and third centuries. So it was, above all, in their own interest to project the features of rabbinic organization back to earlier stages in Judaism, causing the more historical characteristics of the Pharisees who lived before the Jewish war to become mixed up with those of later date. In their turn, the Christians, constantly quarrelling with the Judaism of the synagogues they had so recently separated from, felt the need to justify their position by projecting their criticisms back in time and putting arguments into Jesus's mouth that made better sense in their own *Sitz im Leben.* Which is not to say that the fierce attacks on the Pharisees, particularly vehement in Matthew, do not originate in arguments used by Jesus in disputes with his theological opponents, but only that they are wider in scope and concentrate on what was the target of controversy for Christians decades later.

A secondary but particularly interesting result of this manipulation after the event is that the evangelists sought to absolve the Roman authorities and the Roman procurator, Pontius Pilate, from any direct responsibility for Jesus's trial and condemnation. While each Gospel follows its own path, they are largely in agreement. The process of exoneration is a curious one: in Mark Pilate knows the Judaic leaders are jealous of Jesus and tries to have him released; in Matthew his wife persuades him of Jesus's innocence and he finally makes a show of washing his hands in a bowl of water to demonstrate he has nothing to do with the trial in a moral sense; in Luke he sends Jesus to Herod in an attempt to extricate himself from the affair; and in John he does all he can to exonerate Jesus and converses with him on theological matters. As with similar cases, this apparent tendency to exonerate Pilate, though it in fact conceals an ingenious second level, led to a myth-making hagiographic process, so that some Christian churches treated him as a real saint; such an outcome would have astonished a Roman procurator accustomed to political skullduggery and completely indifferent to the religious in-fighting of Judaism. Undoubtedly, as a historical fact, Pilate had nothing to do with the theological issues behind the attack on Jesus, and that reduces the extent of his concern to absolve him, which is not impossible in itself but must be subordinate to the political priorities dictated by the procurator's role and mentality. This controversial passage dividing responsibility for the Crucifixion between Jews and Romans has also triggered charges of anti-Semitism, especially a statement in Matthew about Christ's blood being destined to fall on the Jews and their children and certain anti-Judaic

statements in the fourth Gospel. It should be added, though, that Matthew intended to refer to the Jewish war, the fruit, as he saw it, of the pernicious seed of refusing Jesus, and of the earlier stubborn refusal of the Judaic leadership to admit any wrongdoing, past or present; John starts from the same observation to underscore the Jews' refusal of salvation in the person of the preexisting incarnate Mediator. To avoid crass falsification, we must never forget that the aim of the gospel accounts of the Passion is not to present a judicial record but to narrate the central event in world history, in which universal sin comes to the surface. This claim may appear absurd, but it was undeniably the view of the gospel writers and of their readers and has to be borne in mind by modern commentators if they are not to make fools of themselves.

This excursus to review the strategy the evangelists evolved to argue their propaganda should teach us not to idealize their texts uncritically or demonize them according to ideological schemes of a much later date. In any event, it raises the same questions as might emerge from a dispassionate historical-critical examination of the Hebrew Bible. I want to go back now to the question of the truth status of the Bible texts in relation to sacrifice, and to the myths and history compounded with it.

## 5. The Bible and Sacrifice

Girard's answer to the question, that the truth of the Bible in both Old and New Testaments consists in the truth of the revealed victim, is the most notable attempt in contemporary thinking to argue the case for the central importance Jews and Christians claim for their scriptures. And it is all the more remarkable for being based on some of the most fundamental results of nineteenth- and twentieth-century thought, ideas that Girard turns on their heads starting with their very premises: Nietzsche's death of God and his openly stated exaltation of Dionysus against Christ crucified; Freud's demystification of the psyche with its links to mankind's bloody origin; and Bultmann's plan to demythologize the Bible texts by isolating their theological matter and ridding it of all historically dated, representative dross. Although Girard had shaken things up most positively when it seemed nothing could emerge but an increasingly predictable series of modern demystifications, his

theory suffers from so many exceptions, and turns out to be so distant from the representational world and mentality of the Bible authors, that its true import is drastically reduced. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that after its initial, partial welcome by some Biblicists it is no longer mentioned in exegetical studies, apart from receiving occasional support from diehard followers of the theory.

My views about cultural mediations, and about the object that is their raison d'être, can, I believe, bring new life to discussion of the subject, taking the best from Girard's approach but drawing on an idea of history that differs in scope and context. My basic thesis is that the Bible texts have no monopoly on the truth they contain; instead, the objectual truth of mankind regarding man, a truth variously attained by all human cultures, gradually makes its way, acquiring its own particular accent in the Judaic and Christian tradition as a direct result of the troubled events surrounding the development of monotheism and the theology centered on Christ. Thus no abstract truth of the victim exists, no theory of the victim that opens all doors as if by magic; instead, we find a growth in knowledge of the price to be paid for divine and human mediations, and the need for a divine mediation that no longer demands that price and can interpret and guarantee a process to humanize the world. Far indeed from being achieved in any age including our own, the need is nonetheless ineradicable once it has become part of man's representations and cultural mediations.

Jesus did not come to bring knowledge of the victim and sacrifice in these representational and abstract terms, something inconceivable to his Jewish mind, or to any other mind in antiquity. He came to announce a joyful, loving mediation with Yahweh whose inner dynamic is mutual forgiveness, showing a willing disposition in human beings that opens the way to God's infinite readiness and to an objectual reacquisition that cannot be destroyed because attained and confirmed through destruction itself. This is the driving force and the purpose behind the Jesuan *kerygma,* concentrated into potent formulas in the Christology of John, starting with the prime Mediation that was with God and was God, the formula serving to introduce the fourth Gospel as a whole and encapsulating all that was essential in the evangelist's religious vision. In respect to the old sacrificial, sacral, and ritual mediations, this ecstatic experience of transitive Mediation had a liberating effect, not because Jesus possessed anything more than historical awareness but because

he continued and intensified a process of objectual discovery that was the real spiritual and cognitive core of Judaism. And what holds good for Jesus holds good for all figures representing the Yahwistic mediation: the prophets, priests, and writers who developed this vision of the historical, objectual acquisition of the human, having identified the oppressed and downtrodden that the mediations of the time and most of their coreligionists ignored or considered it their sacred duty to trample and oppress.

This supplies the criterion needed to approach the Bible texts without distorting them and thus missing their message, and without being scandalized by the violence of which they are the result and the retroacting expression. Our starting point must always be the type of mediation that makes the existence of those texts possible, and that the texts explore and try to transmit to the public, not in a modern literary way but in a productive, performative spirit that tends to become one with the mediation. This is illustrated, *narrated,* according to the same logic as the *mythos,* but it takes the objectual and cognitive aims of the *mythos* further and deeper until its own *mythos* is able to begin to see and explain itself retroacting with its conditions of existence. The nature and results of the process do not depend on a surmise of awareness appearing suddenly from who knows where, since the overall process *is* this awareness as it takes shape and comes to definition, achieving specific goals and realizing them within itself long before they become the object of more abstract and theoretical representations.

The point therefore is not to see how far a text conforms to criteria of truth and validity determined beforehand, but to allow the tendency of the text to emerge, to carefully record and interpret the phenomena and bring the *obiectum* into focus, that is, the objective and object that the text is tending toward. This is equivalent to saying that the *obiectum* pursued by the text is its criterion of truth and validity: the historical, existential manifestation of Yahweh for Judaic authors; for Jesus, the realization of the Father's mediation in the Kingdom announced by the Son; and for the first Christian writers, the complete accomplishment of the Son's mediation. This is not to imply we need not bother to establish the historical nature of a Bible text in the light of modern knowledge: in fact, we need just such a basic historical reconstruction in order to retrieve the mediatory world where the text in question had its origin. The historical-critical, textual, and contextual knowledge available to us in no way contradicts the inner

message of the text, as long as it pursues the aim of the text to discover and acquire a living, humanly real *obiectum,* analogous to the contested infant in the Judgment of Solomon. We will return now to this episode; its narrative provides all we need to recognize its core of concentrated meaning. There is a theatrical, anecdotal flavor to it, including the surprise ending, which proves it comes from the Hellenistic period, while Buddhist literature, we may note, has a very similar anecdote, possibly derived from the same source or indeed is itself the source.[72] This is enough to show the episode has nothing historical about it; we know, besides, that the figure of Solomon is largely legendary, and blown out of all proportion as a prestigious temple builder, a temple that was really the projection back in time of the Second Temple.

We would appear to be looking at one of those artificial, tendentious constructions already recognized in both Testaments, Old and New, but we must be careful not to make hasty and deceptively demystifying judgments since, for the Bible writers, these are all means to serve one end: to visualize the real significance of God's mediation and of the human object it guarantees. And that brings us to the crucial factor in the Judgment of Solomon: the infant is *alive* and only the woman who wants it to stay alive is the real mother. This objectual dimension is what the more advanced Bible writers want us to make our own, so that the true maternity of the real mother ceases to be the attribute of one woman in a curious story and becomes instead a transitive property of the reader because this is the transitivity of Yahweh, his maternity and paternity (combining the functions of the archaic Asherah as well), his truth from which all other truths descend. The fictitious, fictional element thus turns out to be instrumental in acquiring real knowledge, with all that is manipulated and invented subordinated to it, if only the author is systematic and consistent. And once the objectual aim is achieved, a cognitive retroaction begins, taking what serves the more immediate ends of *captatio benevolentiae* or propaganda and adapting it for its own purposes. Going back to the example of the gospel accounts of the Passion, the attempts to acquit Pilate and the Romans of direct responsibility for the death of Jesus, if taken together, are not trying to demonstrate they are entirely innocent since their overall accent falls on the part they took in causing the outbreak of violence, their obedience to a *raison d'état* no less culpable than the hatred that led to the arrest of Jesus, and their skeptical

indifference to the transcendent Truth incarnate in Jesus. With typical irony, the fourth Gospel dramatizes this by putting words into Pilate's mouth that fall outside any routine judicial questioning: "What is truth?" (18:38). From a certain point of view, the question shows the Roman governor to be even further from the truth standing right before him. The attribution of responsibility and guilt comes to be finely graded in this way: there is the responsibility of the Judaic authorities and the city mob they incited against Jesus, while Pilate's share of the guilt, and his political opportunism, are subtly exposed. But before any of this, the nature of the whole affair as original sin is marked by the betrayal, abandonment, and denial of Jesus by all the disciples, according to Mark and faithfully reproduced in Matthew, while the other two Gospels allude to his abandonment by all the disciples through Jesus's prediction that they would all be scandalized on his account and through Peter's denial. In other words, none are blameless, starting with those who had direct dealings with Jesus, and all have influenced the way his life on earth ended.

The relationship with history is thus turned around; from having been a factual core, a point of departure and arrival to be arrived at, or not, through findings of a positivistic and empirical nature, history now becomes the full meaning and content of human history. In other words, it becomes historicity, that is to say, the creative heart of human history and the countless stories that go to make it. So we come to the point of convergence of the ideal and sensible planes, of *typos* and *antitypos,* developed by Judaism in dialogue with Greek philosophy and Plato in particular during the Hellenistic period; these planes merge, at least theologically, in the mediatory and objectual formulations of Christology, with Christ's nature, divine and human, seen as perfectly distinct and perfectly joined. This is why when we read the Gospels, unlike the experience of reading modern biographies, we are starved of detailed, empirical information about Jesus, but we are also denied the exemplary, instructive anecdotes found in ancient biographies. If the curiosity of modern biographers reflects their desire to reach the object in the absence of really effective mediations, whereby the desire to know corresponds to an objectual deficit that no information is going to supply, the classical use of exempla, on the other hand, preserved the distinction between the model and its sensible copies, the original and its shadow, the permanent and the fleeting. An opposition between what is ontologically

and axiologically valid and what is accidental that made it possible for Greek philosophy to conceive a bridge, a *metaxy*, and finally led the Judaic and still more Christian historicity to overcome its oppositional stance while preserving what is intermediating essential. If every curiosity, ancient and modern, were to be satisfied, the reader would never be able to reach the significance of the divine mediation that bursts in on the human world through Jesus.

Consequently, the Judgment of Solomon, and the sapiential and objectual truth it confronts us with, takes on figural/imaginal value as a touchstone for biblical interpretation. It is a hermeneutic stone rejected by the builders because it corresponds to the greater stumbling block, the *skandalon* of Christ's cross, holding up to public display the *crux* already suggested by the child about to be cut in two, who also proves to be the head of the corner that both the correct interpretation *and* the final solution of the story depend on. The outcome of the quarrel between the two prostitutes coincides with its successful interpretation, and only that could guarantee the judicial outcome, shrewdly decided by the wisdom of Solomon that came to him from God.

The Crucifixion unites all these factors in a single event: the wisdom coming from God is personified in the Son of God, and the position of victim occupied by the infant comes, in Christ, to be one with the choice of self-sacrifice accepted by the mother in the Judgment in order to save her child. And, conversely, the parable even defines the attitude of those who fail to understand because they do not want to; in the words of the false mother: "Let it be neither mine nor yours; divide it!" (1 Kings 3:26); as far as its result is concerned, this attitude amounts to the mob's shout of *Crucify him* in Matthew. In its objectual implications, the Judaic and Christian mediation is no different from this infant, since it is the premise that makes the child's salvation possible, as Alessandro Manzoni observes at the beginning of his *Observations on Catholic Morality,* replying to rationalist criticisms of the principle of the indivisible unity of the church. The church sublime Manzoni has in mind is the eternal Israel, the everlasting church—what he calls "Mother of saints / image of the heavenly city" in the hymn *Pentecost;*[73] with the enthusiasm of the newly converted, making light of all the problems, he simply identifies it with the historical church in all its limitations. He nonetheless recognizes, with symbolic-figural logic, a theme common to the entire Judaic and Christian tradition:

> It is the transaction of the false mother in the judgment of Solomon: Let it be neither yours nor mine; divide it. But there are no real half-faiths, no more than there are living half-infants.[74]

Manzoni fixes on the pivotal point in the Judgment and makes it absolute, extending it to embrace the Catholic faith as a whole, when it would have been more correct to proceed in the opposite direction and trace the Christian faith, or Judaism, back to the disputed child. Despite this modulation, typical of his age, Manzoni's words make it perfectly clear that half-faith is quite content with a child cut in half; this is the lukewarm faith, neither hot nor cold, of the letter to the church in Laodicea in Revelation, and it ends in secretly murderous indifference. In short, we can conclude that suitably scientific inquiry is not in conflict with correctly interpreting of the Judaic and Christian scriptures but actually promotes it. Such inquiry needs to be sensitive to their historical phenomena and must aim to explain them nonreductively, since the message of both scriptures is situated—and situates us—at the point when things became historical, at the origin of historicity: the object, destroyed, excluded cognitively at the blind spot of the mediations deriving from it, and rehabilitated in a retroacting vision of their origin. Phenomenologically, the perspective we obtain is in keeping with its object of study, and therefore complies with the objective procedure required by modern science. If it were otherwise, we could not explain how the religious value of the Bible texts has not only survived a whole series of critical analyses, often skeptical or hostile in nature, but has been able to develop and become consolidated through them, able to revise its age-old framework of theology and metaphysics and able to rediscover objectual meanings previously undervalued or unknown. No other religious tradition has had to pass through such a barrage and yet it has emerged cleansed of mediatory and intermedial residues no longer functional for their object and, moreover, confirmed in its basic rationale. Such an outcome would have been unthinkable if the tradition had lacked the power of interacting with history, or rather of making history, historicity, decisive for its truth and verification.

All this is by no means free of textual and historical complications calling for one of two things, it might be said, either supreme interpretive skill or a simple and humble faith—two extremes that are not so far apart as our intellectualism might think—but it all adds up when we encounter

those moments of greatest human and objectual veracity. In the Christian perspective that moment occurs with the crucial sequence of the Passion, which is not to be read as an anti-Judaic polemic, a charge currently leveled at early Christian texts, nor as a polemic against the whole of human history after the style of Nietzsche and Girard with their opposing apologetics. It is, instead, a simple, overwhelming revelation of the greatest mystery in human history, an inexhaustible meditation on the price of human mediations and on the opportunities opened up by Jesus Christ for a mediation with no penalty attached to it apart from the one he accepted to suffer. Right from the very start of his *Contra Celsum* Origen supports his argument with this final point of convergence, this stone rejected only to become the cornerstone, leaving Christ to his eloquent silence before his accusers and demonstrating, through this act of withdrawal, the real nature of his own apologia. And so we arrive at the central issue every exegetical study must face if it is to be grounded in theology and history, an issue where an objectual approach to interpretation comes to be one with the Christian and Christic approach to sacrifice understood as a threshold of objectual destruction and redefinition.

## 6. A True *Mythos*

If an interpretive method is to have philosophical and theological value beyond its strictly scientific value, a critical analysis of its attitude and implicit or explicit assumptions is indispensable. This is even truer when it approaches a theme such as the origin of its underlying cultural mediations and, as in the present case, needs to see how they interact with texts as remote in time as those of the Bible. However, the argument can also be turned around, in the sense that the first task facing any inquiry is to ascertain whether the texts contain reflections about sacrificial experience, and what exactly they are, since that experience, in the view put forward here, lies at the root of what are for us historical-cultural mediations. To that end, then, we need to define the historical medium we share with the world of the Bible; however, once we stop thinking about it, it cuts us off from that world inexorably.

If we are not to misunderstand the historical content of the scriptures, we must first suspend the characteristic modern attitude to history that sees

it as a factual, event-based chronicle. Christianity's founding texts, the four Gospels, systematically disappoint this attitude, and to some extent this must be regarded as intentional, since it solicits the mediations we ourselves start from, in the face of a Mediator who calls those mediations into question. Nothing could be more mistaken than to think of the Gospels as modern-style biographies, but it would hardly be better to take them for *bioi* of the ancient type. Practically everything we find in a biography today is missing in them, and often enough, as soon as we arrive at some detailed information, it turns out to fit into theological symbolism so powerful that factual aspects are made subservient and are even generated from within. And the ancient biographical tendency to derive the greatness of eminent lives from their conformity to the impersonal ontology of the *kosmos,* such we see deployed in Plutarch and Diogenes Laertius, is entirely out of place in the case of Jesus, whose exemplary character derives entirely from his submission to the personal mediation of the Father who is in the end the sole and unseen protagonist that all events can be traced back to. This does not mean there is no core of historical fact in what is narrated; indeed, the mediatory and spiritual message of the text acquires its form and substance from real words and experiences, but in order for them to be revealed, they have to be included in a process of theological reflection that expands out from them until it reaches us. Historicity reaches us when we cease to think about it, whereas if we chase after it as an independent datum it slips from our grasp, leaving us empty-handed.

Until we come to the Passion our curiosity remains wholly unsatisfied and has to be content just to understand that what Jesus proposes is not a personalistic recipe but the transitive dynamic of the Kingdom of God. So we know almost nothing about much of his life, and what little we do know is mostly figural, making any factual or documentary verification insignificant; and when we look still closer the void becomes embarrassing and the silence deafening: we know nothing about his character, his habits, or his appearance. He is a pure living mediation, an incarnate Mediation, but to access him we must avoid the disbelieving attitude adopted by his fellow countrymen as described in all four Gospels. They are therefore a warning to us and give us hints as to when our interpretation fits in with the existential and moral involvement of the Word that they transmit or, vice versa, when it is consistent with its refusal. We can find historicity as long as we do not become obsessed by it, and considering there are few historical circumstances

we can be sure about, this is more than ever confirmed by the hostile reception given to Jesus by his fellow citizens, since it accords with the two criteria of multiple attestation and embarrassment.

The passage in John is particularly far-reaching in scope; from the rejection of Jesus by those who knew him it broadens to become a refusal of the "bread that came down from heaven":

> The Jews then murmured against him, because he had said: "I am the bread that came down [*ho katabas*] from heaven," and they said: "Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he say then, I came down from heaven?" (6:42)[75]

Jesus's acquaintances will not even wait to hear his unprecedented sacramental teaching about the bread of life, the manna-bread that is Christ, and in that way their murmurings can be seen as continuing the murmurings of the children of Israel just before the episode of the manna in the desert in Exodus 16:2, one of the many episodes in the Pentateuch that go back to scenarios of collective violence, part of Israel's ancient catalog of myths. The evangelist transforms the incomprehension of Jesus's fellow countrymen into a symbol of unwillingness on a massive scale, comprising not only the Jews but all mankind. The version of Jesus's words given by his acquaintances/nonacquaintances is already indicative, omitting the reference to bread and making what he said sound like a boast of divine provenance, ignoring the mortal aspect of the verb *katabaino.* It occurs to no one that this kind of attitude is what makes it necessary for the bread sent down by the Father into the wilderness of human life to allow itself to be devoured by those who dwell there. The passage inserted in 6:51b–58 makes it unequivocally clear that to come down from heaven means to be eaten, masticated by others—the verb *trogein,* originally applied to animals, renders the physical nature of the act—in offering one's life for love of others. Any further explanation would be pointless. This is why Jesus answers by saying that nobody could come to him had not the Father sent him to draw men and women to him, which signifies not that the Son is visible through the unilateral grace of the Father but that the mediations of both, Son and Father, are rendered accessible if they are brought into contact and their reciprocal relationship is maintained. In John Jesus does not come on the scene like an alien being for

his acquaintances to recognize through some spontaneous, superimposed miracle; he wants to be recognized for what he is, the son of Joseph and Mary, who testifies to a new type of transitivity with the mediation of God and gives it credibility through his words and choices. That would presuppose an open-mindedness excluded a priori by the closed minds of those who think they know him, so that nothing unforeseen might occur, no way to salvation might open up. The picture is one of a spiritual inertia that prevents access to the proffered *Logos,* the Mediation that is the principle and origin of love; and it visualizes the rejection referred to in the Prologue, the darkness men prefer to the light (3:19). The only remedy is for the son of Joseph and Mary to complete his *katabasis* and let himself be eaten by those who reject him, in that way showing he is the Son sent by the Father and destined to return to him.

In the synoptic Gospels we find the same theme treated more simply without, however, overlooking the theological significance of the hostile reception as a sign of much vaster rejection to come. The concluding comment in Matthew and Mark about the reactions of Jesus's fellow citizens says it all in a few words: "And they were scandalized by him" (Mt 13:57; Mk 6:3). Here the *skandalon* anticipates what was to happen in the Passion and indicates the reluctant attitude to the divine mediation due to the superior strength of worldly mediations that are unfit to attain the object they nonetheless claim to possess. Luke, developing this idea in a more extensive figural narrative, sets the incident at the start of Jesus's public mission in a kind of narrative equivalent of the miracle at Cana that is almost a parable in itself. When Jesus arrives in Nazareth and starts to preach in the synagogue, the people ask in astonishment: "Is not this Joseph's son?" (Lk 4:22). Jesus's answer is a penetrating attack on their desire for portents to justify his words, adding that the only miracles to be expected are reserved for foreigners, that is to say, for the least accepted element, the outsiders in small, closed communities. This provokes an immediate reaction from his listeners:

> And on hearing these things, all those in the synagogue were filled with rage [*thymou*] and rose up [*anastantes*], and drove [*exebalon*] him out of the city and led him to the brow of the hill on which their city was built, to throw him over the precipice. But he passed through their midst [*dia mesou*] and went his way [*eporeueto*].[76]

The vocabulary drawn from Greek tragedy and wisdom is highly evocative; *thymos* indicates collective rage, then comes the compound form of the verb *ballo,* and finally *poreuo* that describes the exiting from the most primitive aporia, when the mob closed in on the victim from all sides, in this case to force Jesus to throw himself into the void; a technique used in hunting and persecution from the very earliest times, in Luke it marks the start of Jesus's public career. There is a two-way movement, up as the crowd rises against Jesus and down into the void, visualizing in dramatic form the origin of the upward/downward movement of Christ we find in John. The precipice is an invented detail since, as every commentator has noted, Nazareth is not a hilltop town and consequently there are no precipices; however, the reference is to a deeper figural truth, even more precipitous than the ravine imagined by Luke, with a sense of reality more real than any geographical and historical feature. And the conclusion of the incident is surprisingly accurate since in the cases that anthropology would collect, the victim really did fall over the precipice, in terror of his persecutors. This implies an imitative dynamic between pursuers and pursued that Jesus, as the incarnate mediation of the Father, effortlessly and with supreme detachment passes beyond. The son of Joseph who scandalizes his fellow citizens by discovering himself to be the son of God has another mediation, an "other" mediation that he must obey, and so can do what nobody else in his place would do: he can approach his potential executioners unafraid and take them by surprise, then depart unharmed, cutting his way through the human wall *dia mesou,* from the middle, as if it were transparent, as if it lacked the objectual consistency that in fact it does lack. As far as I know, no artist or writer has ever depicted the scene in all its surprising and paradoxical truth. Even if the outlook for Jesus's mission among men appeared far from rosy, his "hour" had not yet come; and contrary to the stereotypical image of his figure, all his time and energy was devoted to the chosen mediatory task and its accompanying risks.

That is not to say we are obliged to wander around in a mystic fog if we want to know Jesus historically: quite the contrary, and the proof is provided by the Passion.[77] The Passion is the demonstration showing us it is Christ's mediation that enables us to understand history, introducing us to its more profound truth, so that what we usually mean by "history" and *mythos* is overturned and swept away. A *re*knowable reality starts to develop within

human *mythoi* that had begun to know their basis in reality but were still unable to *re*know it, that is, to know it again in a self-reflecting way. This progress worked via the human *mythoi* and so, of necessity, was expressed in their language. To credit Jesus with omniscience about what was happening to him would mean not only to absolutize in a way scientifically untenable, but also to abandon the principle of the Incarnation as it can be understood today, that is, as having its place within a *Sitz im Leben* defined by history and culture. And yet it would be even more untenable to think of Jesus, who used to be seen as dominating history, as entirely swallowed up by it, reduced to the disappointing level of a provincial preacher, or a dreamer deluded by expectations we find incomprehensible and mythological, because the traditional interpretations that bracketed the Jesus of history with the Christ of faith at least preserved the claim recognizable in both to mediatory completeness, the irresistible mainspring, or unacceptable provocation, of his *kerygma*. Once again, the fourth Gospel, while seeming to deny any compatibility between the perspective of Jesus and the first Christian generations and that of today's interpretative viewpoint, helps us regain a more complete, more relevant sense of history that can embrace them all.

The total control of the situation displayed by Jesus in John is not meant as part of a true chronicle, a factual history of what happened, but a theologically faithful account of events as they were handed down. The human, historical aspect is an integral part of that, but it is consequent on God's plan for creation and the *Logos*-Mediation's choice to become a creature himself in order to save and redeem mankind and the whole of creation. The story of Christ's life on earth and the history of mankind and creation are part of a larger story, the story of God and of his will to manifest his love in the course of history, corresponding to Origen's "providence" (*pronoia*).[78] But precisely this historicity, steeped in theology and not yet open to event-based history as we understand it, makes it possible to regain the historical viewpoint of Jesus when he chose to face up to the catastrophic events threatening his work as a religious teacher and author of signs. Naturally, the preexisting Christology belongs to John, but Jesus must have interpreted what happened to him on the basis of the divine mediation he felt to be guiding him and, at a certain point, had called for him to witness as the Suffering Servant, as Zerubbabel. If that is the case, human history, regarded as part and consequence of a divine history that interacts with the free choice

of men, comes within the theological perspective of the historical Jesus and from the beginning forms part of the interpretive-witnessing mechanism of the Passion. For us, that beginning is event-based and documentary; for Jesus it was theological; for John Christological and preexisting; and for the Church Fathers, Trinitarian. Our immanent historicism should be added to this series, since it would not exist in its tireless desire to recover the *Sitz im Leben* of the historical actors if the infinite objectual value assigned to them, on account of the divine history incarnate in them, had not already existed. And that brings us to the question of the Passion's cognitive value, and how far it is useful to philosophers, scientists, and historians.

Jesus could have had no idea of the anthropological and theoretical importance of his trial and execution. This comment is sound common sense, but the question does not stop there; on the contrary, it begins there since, over the centuries, the accounts of the Passion have had an undeniable cognitive impact, modifying perception in countries touched by Christianity. Persecution and execution of Christians has continued, but procedural rules and limitations have developed that are significant from a social and cultural viewpoint, while minorities have formed more awareness of the message of the Passion. If Nietzsche was able to oppose Dionysus to Christ starting from a single story, a single *mythos,* it was because of this influence, and Girard did well to highlight this fact. And the same influence was behind Bataille's unforgettable experience of mystical *trance* looking at photographs of the Chinese torture known as the death of a thousand cuts.[79] The transition we need to focus on here is that this was all the cognitive repercussion of a mediation in itself intended as theological, and it began from a historical nucleus, event-based for us but intermediating, intermedial, and mediatory for the actors at the time. Moreover, this transition to an immanent historical consciousness/sensibility is the result of a sensibility developed in the West, with an attention to history typical of Latin Christianity, while Greek Christianity's idea of history remained theological and future-directed, looking to the salvation of a human world conceived inchoatively as already redeemed and resurrected.

We find ourselves, then, to be part of a lengthy process. The immanent, anthropological aspect is its consequence, in a way not incompatible with the traditional claims made by the religious mediations involved but fully and freely available for use in the cognitive and moral spheres, since the

constant concern of that immanent aspect is to push back the frontier of human objectual value. Gradually, over time, the human *mythos* concretized and looked back to see itself, changing to become a true *mythos* capable of detaching itself from preceding forms that appear comparatively regressive and antiobjectual. The gospel Passion is not the only defining moment in that long process; there are equally decisive moments of objectual discovery associated with the Judaic tradition, and no less significant ones are present in other great cultures. Besides the Greek and Roman civilizations we dealt with in the first volume, I would mention the analyses of sacrifice in the Hindu tradition, Buddhism's surpassing of the logic of sacrifice in a cosmic-metaphysical key, and Taoism's development of situational metaphysics, entirely located in the here and now experienced by beings (not only human). In exalting the humble and weak, Taoism also reveals some surprising points of contact with the gospel message. The Christian Passion, especially in the form it assumed in the West, brought these cognitive and objectual repercussions into the human domain, which was focused and absolutized in comparison with the cosmic and metaphysical coordinates dominating many other cultures; and it is from there that our conception of humanity and history stems.

This brings out the Passion's most disarming aspect: the fact that it is extraordinary precisely because it is not extraordinary, not the story of a mythical blending of the human with a heavenly entity but simply the story of the persecution and death of a human being, including that story's religious and theological developments. In this regard we can appreciate the historical and objectual significance of the principle developed by Christology in its maturity, in the fourth and fifth centuries, the principle that Christ was fully human and fully divine, perfectly distinct and perfectly united, preserving human history within divine history in a formulation no less paradoxical than the Trinity itself. And the fourth Gospel reminds us of the humanity of Christ's Passion through his example in washing the disciples' feet. In the same way, the gospel account of the Passion makes no claim to a superior, privileged position, since it sets out to wash the feet of all mankind and puts itself entirely at the service of humanity. In this movement of offering and knowledge lies the Passion's value as *figura* and representation, coinciding with its objectual value, as long as we understand its inspiration, the existential truth that becomes religious truth if we so desire.

The Passion is not an independent historical reality limited to demonstrating the truth of the parables; it is the supreme parable identical with the historical reality it represents; not the truth contained in the signs, the miracles, performed by Christ but the sign miraculously identical with what it signifies; not an island of antimyth illuminating the preceding mythic representations but the myth itself speaking its own truth. This translates into a narrative strategy that proves effective by subtly defeating itself. Having sidestepped and disappointed our banal exemplaristic curiosity and, in countless different ways, sent their message that the only important thing is the mediation offered by Christ and incarnated in him, the Gospels finally satisfy our thirst for empirical or idealizing information. But they do it in the most unwelcome and disagreeable manner by showing us the violent implications of our expectations and transmitting Jesus's final testimony as the believable but disbelieved incarnation of his word, accomplishing what his countrymen in Nazareth had failed to accomplish. All mediatory expectations of a spectacular and violent kind are brushed aside when the Son of God allows himself to be made a public mockery, and it is then that the mediation of the God of the Gospels is manifested in its silent sovereignty, not far indeed from the sovereignty Bataille had in mind, but resolved in a definitive objectual possession of a new kind, in the glory invisible to the world spoken of in the fourth Gospel. This is the very heart of every *figura Christi,* the point at which Christ becomes the real *figura* of God and mankind, the object of human violence that becomes the object of divine salvation, objectuality redeemed and resurrected. We can sense the centrality of this discovery, this figural experience with its roots deep in the Western Christian tradition, if we think of the developments it fostered in Latin Europe, in the figurative arts as well, and their explosion into modernity beginning with the Renaissance. All our ideas about reality and realism come from there, however much they may be defaced, brutalized, and mortified by the present anobjectual tsunami. But the pure *figura* of a humanly real Beauty remains as a reminder for us of the indelible nature of such an achievement.

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Our comparative analyses of Christianity have covered a lot of ground and brought us to a better understanding of Johannine theology but also to considering the possible relationship of Jesus to sacrifice, the Judaism he

belonged to, and the early Christian tradition that broke with it. Within that context, the mother of Jesus, whom he enigmatically calls "woman" (*gynai*), plays a shadowy but central role in the miracle at Cana. And it is to the significance of women in Christianity that the next chapter is devoted, since Mary has some surprises in store for us regarding the historical and comparative argument being developed here. As we shall discover, nothing is more intimately comparative than Mariology, except for the Christology to which it provides a commentary and introduction.

5.

# Mary's Mediation

## 1. The Enigma of the Mariophanies

In the Christian tradition, Christ's mediation cannot be properly dealt with unless we also consider the mediation of his mother, which in a typically subordinate but complementary form, prepares, accompanies, and completes it. The New Testament contains telling details about Mary's mediation. Though few in number and unsystematically distributed, they nevertheless provided a sufficient basis for popular piety to inflate the importance of her figure even in antiquity, making it an essential element in the Christian cult ranking second only to Christ. No historical and comparative study of Christianity, such as the one being developed here, can afford to ignore her, and the marriage in Cana episode in John, where her function is subservient but strategic and sacrifice takes on notable significance even in its original Dionysian form, effectively illustrates just how essential her discreet presence is. However, before we examine Mary's mediation in relation to Christ's, it is of some religious and anthropological interest to begin by looking at her position in Christianity today.

The figure of Mary is indissolubly bound up with woman's role in Christianity as well as Judaism and has become a subject of topical interest again

with the increase in women's liberation in modern times. Linking the two is as inevitable as it is dangerous since it lends itself to misunderstandings and anachronisms of various kinds. These occur in one direction or another, in the sense that just as Mary's religious significance can be misunderstood and has been misunderstood in a sexual-phobic and male-centered way, with the objections that contemporary awareness can legitimately bring against this kind of position, so, in an analogous but opposite way, theologians have been tempted to sidestep the issue of sexuality altogether and stress traditional assertions about Mary, without acknowledging the bedrock of ancient theories about conception upon which those theological assertions were based. Questions of sex and gender cannot be eliminated from the Marian theme but must be approached with a genuine historical and religious sensibility, or we will throw out the babe with the bathwater, to adopt a not completely inappropriate metaphor. We need to avoid the excesses of contemporary ideologizing no less than fanciful flights of indiscriminate metaphysicizing.

From earliest times the Catholic Church has promoted an intense Marian cult with equally intense Mariological reflection, and we should not forget that the most recent official theological pronouncements have been wholly concerned with Mary—the dogmas of the Immaculate Conception in 1854 and of the Assumption in 1950. Moreover, Mary is currently the focus of the largest manifestations of popular Catholic religious feeling, linked to apparitions of the Virgin that it would be antiscientific to dismiss as mere superstition. From the anthropological viewpoint Mariophanies are a remarkable phenomenon because they repeat, in a Christian and devotional context, the same ecstatic-objectual experience that by my hypothesis lies at the origin of culture. What I mean is that a *type* of experience recurs since, in the apparitions of the Virgin, Christianity appears to modify the experience so that it takes on its own peculiar and spiritual features: the apparition is normally revealed to one seer, and even when whole groups are involved the message remains essentially addressed to the individual. However, the message itself is in no way exclusive and finds its complementary collective and social forms within the church, considering that Mariophanies give rise to mass cults and remain structurally incomplete if they fail to do so.

The operant criterion for the authenticity of the Marianic phenomena has been their compatibility with the *depositum fidei,* itself a body of evidence and a criterion for the church's exclusion of many similar phenomena. The

type of phenomenon is therefore not supernatural in itself, and indeed specific cultural data exist for its better philosophical and scientific evaluation, which ultimately means religious as well. In fact, besides being expressed in the language and dialects of the seers, the content and messages of the apparitions reflect a sort of common perception of the Christianity of the time and community in which they occur, almost as if they recovered extremely archaic states of collective consciousness. And yet there is no conflict at all with the extreme clarity of the vision or with prophetic and profound theological statements (such as the words spoken by Our Lady of Lourdes to Bernadette: "I am the Immaculate Conception"), and this is primarily because human rationality originates in comparable object-producing experiences. It is worth spending a few words on the supernatural significance attributed by the church to recognized apparitions and the events associated with them, miraculous cures for the most part.

Any purely factual interpretation of these phenomena proves inadequate from two points of view: from the comparative standpoint, because miracles and healing linked to a divinity or a holy place are a universal phenomenon,[1] the ancient cult of Asclepius being one example;[2] and then, from the historical-cultural standpoint, any evaluation by theological or devotional positivism ignores historical and cultural change in what it regards as a fact in a given context. And that observation merits some reflection. For us, a miracle is an occurrence that cannot be explained by applying current scientific criteria; however, in cultures formed on the mediatory and intermedial pattern, a miracle still has the character of a portent but is evidence of a superior cause, a divine cause and so does not constitute an exception to some immanent law but rather manifests the operation of a law that is transcendent. This was understood quite rationally by ancient and medieval cultures but according to the criteria of another rationality, another *scientia,* the divine one. From this perspective, a miracle is the unexpected, concentrated objectualization of a transcendent mediation without need for belief in order to be effective but needing to be actively present in the cultural environment it mediates. The paradoxical inference to be drawn from this is that no age has been so full of miracles as our own, since no other age has been so bereaved of adequate interpretive tools, seeing that miracles at present are either excluded because everything must have a scientific explanation or greeted as absolutely inexplicable, which provides justification for the most uncritical and unbridled

attitudes. The Catholic Church has always tried to maintain a careful balance on the issue, and clearly, in the absence of any more thorough examination, there is a danger that the factor qualifying the Christian miracle might be overlooked: the fact that it is meaningful not because it is portentous but because it is Christian or, better still, because it conveys meaning, because it is, as John would say, a sign, a signal, not a prodigy to be made the object of idolatrous cults. And it is worth adding that in the Christian view the real miracle lies in implementing the Christological mediation that enables humanity to save itself, revealing the significance brought into human lives by Christ. No criterion of theological positivism can ignore this elementary fact, and no element in the Mariophanies relieves us of the task of understanding and deciding what interpretation we are to follow, since nothing in them can be taken as a self-evident and automatically revealing supernatural fact, which is clearly demonstrated by the church's intense activity to interpret and authorize them.

There are many other points to be made along the same lines, suggested already by the observation that a miracle is always an objectual reconstitution that provides an unexpected response to a state of crisis. And Mariophanies in the present period seem to be resonating on an ever wider collective and social scale, in reaction to the de-Christianization that has characterized European history over the last few hundred years has become patently obvious and, with the accompanying sociopolitical and military crises, rendered ever more devastating by contemporary ideologies along with the advances in technology and industrial production. Mariophanies in numerous cases have come before, during, and after wars, calamities, and revolutions: of the three most popular appearances of the Virgin in the last two hundred years, Lourdes (1858) preceded the Italian War of Independence (1859), Fatima (1917) occurred during the First World War just before the Russian Revolution, and Medjugorje (starting in 1981) preceded, accompanied, and followed the conflict in Yugoslavia, and also satisfied clearly discernible political and identity needs. In France especially, where the church began to face fierce opposition after the Revolution in 1789, there were, before Lourdes, the appearances to Catherine Labouré in Paris beginning in 1830 just before the July Revolution, and the Mariophany of La Salette at the end of 1846 prior to the 1847 famine and the revolutions in 1848; and we could continue to add examples. The most consistent interpretation of these apparitions is that

they constitute a Christian revisitation of the ancient objectual crisis that led to a collective ecstatic experience, the mediatory solution that could be the community's salvation. This crisis has been passed over to contemporary history, always prodigal with its ideological conflicts and mass destruction, and appears perceptible at a collective level while still latent. The resolving ecstatic experience is reserved for one seer alone, or just a handful, who make themselves the passive, authorized receptors of the saving mediation; mass adoration no longer occurs simultaneously but follows later, confirming and publicizing the mediatory phenomenon. The three major Marian apparitions of the last two hundred years mentioned above show progressive amplification, becoming gradually more sensational; and in the case of Medjugorje, the seers have continued to keep regular appointments wherever they happen to be, almost like a television series. And they would still be important phenomena even if we applied Durkheimian sociology to them or Ernesto De Martino's theory of magic as a collective paradigm necessary to stabilize and define reality, since both approaches are far more effective heuristically than those at present operative in sociology and anthropology. In all events, contemporary rationality must not shirk the task of analyzing these phenomena unless it intends to forego understanding our present world, and perhaps our future as well. Indeed, one wonders what the future may hold. Certainly there will be no lack of catastrophes and collective destruction brought about by natural causes or human stupidity, and even more sensational apparitions might occur. One wonders as well if present-day Christianity is not destined to become a strongly Marian neo-Christianity or indeed a Marianism in which the Son fades into the background to become a kind of *deus otiosus.* The idea is deliberately provocative, but it serves to remind us that we need to understand the course of events and not just undergo them in sociological and media terms, and this is a theological necessity, too.

The most appropriate answer is indicated by Johannine Christology and pneumatology, namely that through the historical action of the Holy Spirit, Christ is *really* present in everyone who follows his testimony: that is the real divine manifestation in man, and the real miracle. No Marian cult can superimpose itself on that dynamism or subordinate it without seriously distorting the very raison d'être of the Christian religion, nor does the significance of the figure of Mary lie there. Johannine Mariology reminds us that the fulfillment of Mary's role is closely linked to the Son; and it is

through the maternal link that the "woman" of the miracle at Cana takes on the eschatological significance of the "woman clothed with the sun" in the book of Revelation. And so, ignoring any unwarranted suggestion of the supernatural, we come to the mediatory importance of the figure of Mary.

## 2. Between Spirituality and Sexuality

Mary's maternity is a central factor from every point of view. This might appear to be a commonplace, but it serves as a spur to proper thinking about woman's central position and the specific meaning of a mediation that is able to make its object concrete in the birth of a new human being. Human mediation is in fact intrinsically twofold, fostering and developing cultural characteristics related to the body and sexuality, and transforming differences of sex and gender into differentiated and complementary objectual resources.[3] The male does not possess the object and must permanently seek, secure, and confirm it; he can never take it for granted but must discover it anew each time, making the ongoing process his discovery and definition of the world. Woman, on the other hand, possesses the secret of the object and does not discover the world because she is already a world, providing she is discovered and reached by the male. Otherwise she languishes, incapable of generating the object she holds within her that has still to see the light, reach the world, be the world. In this way the two sexes mediate reciprocally; the secret of their mediation is not specialization but reciprocity and transitivity, which refers to the objectual function of the family that is effective and real only so far as the reversible reciprocity takes place and achieves its purpose. The male and female, or paternal and maternal, mediations are completely realized once they have become integrated and so become stronger, even to the point of exchanging their roles. Indeed, their mediatory roles are not possessions, not predefined objects to be exercised or, worse still, made the subject of a claim; they are reciprocal functions that the opposite sex can also perform providing that the basis is the creative logic that always puts the object, the human being, first and always respects the objectual characteristics of man and woman, making them productive through a mutual exchange that never ends since it holds the secret of every beginning. My thesis is that Mary performs this type of function in Christianity, even if it is far from easy

in this day and age to evaluate her maternity. For a series of reasons we will now try to summarize, the task of translating the theological and metaphysical language of Mariology would appear to be insuperable.

The first point to make is that Mary's virginity was interpreted historically as a total physical or perpetual virginity essentially because of the wholly or largely passive role in procreation attributed to women, while the male role assigned to God through the Holy Spirit was seen as the only active contribution of the two and alone capable of giving a form to the unborn child. The fact that this theory of conception has no scientific basis today is by no means of secondary importance since if we attempted to redefine Mary's perpetual virginity in terms considered to be more compatible with the present state of knowledge we would end up asserting the absurd or the seemingly miraculous. It would be simply grotesque to set about debating how the incarnation could have started with a female ovule and nonexistent male semen, and how to represent it in terms of male and female genetics. Historically, the danger of reifying theological concepts and principles goes back to the intermedial logic with which Christianity tried to define the pivotal mystery of the Incarnation and, on the other hand, the state of sin that the Incarnation was to redeem from. According to Augustinian theory, original sin is transmitted through the semen; from being a shaping medium it changes into a medium for uncleanliness and theologically objective sin, quite independently of the moral defects of the unborn child, in itself destined to eternal damnation unless redeemed by baptism in Christ, in ways just as intermedially material and pneumatic.[4] As a matter of fact, this more robust approach served to fix the necessity of original sin as a historical condition from which humanity could be saved only by the coming of Christ. Nevertheless, such logic needs to be thoroughly understood and translated, not simply accepted as a definitive given fact. What we have here are historically conditioned *mythoi,* and their real meaning is only revealed if they are not detached from the movement that produced them.

There is nothing wrong in appealing to an act of faith to justify principles and representations incompatible with what we know today, since the Christian faith does not set out to explain everything and centers on a mystery that believers, if they want to believe, must accept. But if we acknowledge this argument passively and uncritically, it transforms the ancient experience of faith into a modern dissociation between a noumenon that has become

inconceivable and a phenomenon deprived of force and emptied out, and so restates in a Marian form the dichotomy already noted in Christology. This does a great disservice to the rationalism and science recognized by the Catholic Church, but also to its theology and the principle of the truth of faith that it has always stood by, neither of which should appear to be completely extraneous to what we can know rationally. Therefore, any religious reflection that our present mentality sees as making Mary and her son into abnormal, anomalous beings, into theological monsters, is to be rejected. All physicalist interpretations of her perpetual virginity and the correlated virginal conception of Christ thus fall outside the framework of my analysis. What we need is an approach to the totality of the historical and religious phenomenon that Christ and Mary represent and are.

Seen from this phenomenological-historical perspective, the difficulties presented by the Christian scriptures turn out to be an unexpected resource, confirming their fidelity in handing down material in some cases hardly compatible with later theological representations, and giving indirect support for understanding the real import of the latter. The synoptic tradition tells us of opposition to Jesus from within his family, his mother and brothers being unable to understand or share his adventurous decision to become an itinerant preacher. This detail could be historical since it clearly conflicts with later developments in Christology, Mariology, and Messianism, even though a different possibility is not to be excluded, as we shall see.

The Marcan version is most at variance with the images established by the tradition. In Mark 3:21, Jesus's friends and relatives, having heard about the first miracles and the calling of the disciples, judge him to be "out of his mind" (*exeste*). This problematic passage is closely connected with verses 31–32 where his mother and brothers send for him, evidently in an effort to bring him to his senses. Their incomprehension provokes a terse response from Jesus: "Who is my mother or my brother?" (3:33). According to the criteria of dissimilarity and various witness (apart from Mk 3:21, the hardest point), this testimony might have historical value, although a recent theory considers Mark 3:21 as the more revelatory sentence of a story forged with an aim to discredit Jesus's family after a very early ecclesial phase under the leadership of James "the brother of the Lord."[5] The episode would be created after the execution of James, when this archaic familistic and clanic stage of Jerusalem community finished and a larger ecclesial phase prevailed. The

hypothesis is interesting but does not take into account the relation of this supposed familistic-clanic phase with Jesus's teaching, besides not considering the procedure followed by the evangelists, who usually rework, enlarge, or enrich an episode starting from a kernel deemed authentic and reliable. And it is not difficult to single out the kernel of this pericope in the *logion* of Mark 3:33 (with the following words, they are either authentic or glosses) that, besides answering the criterion of dissimilarity for its nonconformity both to the Jewish social context and the later Christian idealizations, has the Jesuan features of counterquestion and paradoxical reversal. In order to better understand the problem, let us start from the episode as written by the evangelist.

The scene is part of a longer sequence that appears to be a patchwork of different materials. Jesus has just begun his public mission quite sensationally, with many acts of healing and even more numerous exorcisms providing the most spectacular sign of his mission of salvation. An enthusiastic, almost frenzied atmosphere characterizes this powerfully performative beginning and reaches a climax when the "unclean spirits" (*ta pneumata ta akatharta*) throw themselves down before Jesus, crying out: "You are the Son of God!" (3:11). These spirits are the intermedial forces of *kosmos* perverted to evil ends by the original sin of the spirits that rebelled against God, and here they are acknowledging the power of the Christic mediator coming from God. This incident is immediately followed by the calling of the apostles who are given new names by Jesus as a sign of their new identity, their new definitively mediated life. At this point, with Jesus and his disciples so hemmed in by the crowd that they are prevented from eating, his relatives arrive and ask if he is out of his mind; their protestation is the more understandable in view of the Son of God's massive display of his powers. What we have here is outside all normal human scales of behavior and judgment: the rebellious powers of *kosmos* are prostrating themselves before the Son of God. This theological and cosmic drama is quite beyond Jesus's relatives and friends; they simply want him to stay with them, to go back to being what he always was.

Mark could have found an already written episode in two different versions and decided to preserve both, as is usual for him. A first version is only two verses long (3:20–21) and presents the realistic detail of the crowd packed into the house and the hard comment of his relatives: "He is out

of his mind." Garbini advances the conjecture that this is the remnant of the account of Jesus's very first miracle, with some difficulties on his part suggesting an exorcist still a novice, the curious people, and the foreseeable opposition of his family.[6] In any case, we find then a second longer version (3:31–35), reaching its climax in the *logion* on the real parents of Jesus. A stylistic analysis shows that the author has assembled these materials adding some connecting sentences and inserting the miracle of exorcism in the middle.[7] But we have now to examine the implications of these very old materials in terms of Mariology.

No particular importance attaches to the presence of Jesus's mother in this account, which means that no Mariological element was transmitted in the Marcan tradition. This is in contrast to, though not necessarily in conflict with, the traditions that went into the other Gospels and points to the existence of various New Testament traditions, some with no trace of Mariology. Logically (and any historical reconstruction must respect logic), the evidence of Mark's Gospel presents us with two possibilities, leaving aside for now the third possibility of a tendentious version aiming to discredit Jesus's family: either the information is literally correct, in which case there is no historical basis for the virginal birth; or there is some historical basis for the information, but Jesus's mother is grouped together with the *adelphoi* (so-called brothers) because Mark knows of no unusual circumstances concerning his conception.

This raises the question of how Jesus's familial origin could be viewed in very early Christianity, and we have two singular pieces of evidence: the genealogies preserved in Matthew and Luke. D.F. Strauss interprets them as old though unhistorical documents adapted by the evangelists and strongly holds that these genealogies in any case imply the biological paternity of Joseph, otherwise they would have been meaningless:[8] according to his reconstruction the interpretation of *adelphoi* as Jesus's brothers is the most natural, and this is the reading generally followed by the Protestant exegetists, whereas the Catholic exegesis has always tried to make the scriptural datum compatible with the virginal conception by interpreting these *adelphoi* as half-brothers or cousins, not sons of the same mother.

The issue deserves some further explanation, and we shall come back to it again, but it is to be noticed that it reflects a typical difficulty of the Christian mediation that appealing to a divine incarnation that concretely

happened once and for all in precise circumstances and persons, was compelled to justify the likeliness of the event with a series of logical and factual adaptations starting from a human reality that remained obscure just because insignificant in its early phase. Strauss has all the advantage on his side in applying his theory of the mythical superfetation taking the place of a family history quite modest and normal. Nevertheless, the point does not lie in forensic reconstructions or hypotheses according to criteria that, once detached from their original mediatory frame, have become mechanical and external, but rather consists in recognizing the inner logic of the texts and the objectual contents they wanted to express. It is obvious, in fact, that Matthew's and Luke's genealogies have a theological import, considering that the former begins with Abraham and the latter goes all the way back to Adam and God, and that both intend to display the Davidic descent of the Christian Messiah, passing by the explicit insertion of its most tragic and hidden member, Zerubbabel. The early Christian and evangelical witnesses do not fit the double and contradictory criterion of Strauss's mythopoeia and the theological and/or positivistic ascertainment, but hold an intermediate and mediatory position of which *mythos* is the originary expression. This opens the more interesting and fruitful possibility, to some degree prepared by the evangelical texts, that the truth of traditional statements about Mary and Jesus is not based on any purely physical happening but on the *meaning* of an overall experience, to be gathered in its deepest sense, which is not limited to what is human since it is at the very roots of what is human.

The antifamily episode in Mark actually proves valuable in this direction as, even if it were derived from a manipulation subsequent to James's killing, it represents a decisive theological acquisition, corresponding to Jesus's teaching if the *logion* placed as its keystone is authentic. The complex story underlines the fact that there is nothing familistic in the eschatological kinship of which Jesus is the bearer, no ontic satisfaction in the bonds of human relationship. This is not only a useful corrective to the suffocating family and moral claims being made today on Christianity but also helps to give correct value to Mariology, which is not in the least a reflection of divine familism, of an individual privilege accorded to a woman about whom we know nothing, but would certainly know more about if that were really the case. In the end the absence of Mariology in Mark helps to make the other Mariological traditions more intelligible. And we understand better why the evangelist

situated the texts describing the rupture between Jesus and his family on either side of the central episode of the scribes who, anticipating the theme of the clash in the Temple, "came down [*katabantes*] from Jerusalem" purposely to accuse Jesus of being possessed by Beelzebub and casting out (the verb is *ekballein*) devils "by the prince of the devils" (3:22); to which Jesus replies with a counterenigma: "How can Satan cast out Satan [*satanas satanan ekballein*]?" (3:23), that is, "how can Satan eliminate himself and make possible a definitively objectual and saving mediation?" This *mašal* is certainly authentic,[9] and it is followed by the *logion* about forgiveness being refused to whoever "shall blaspheme against the Holy Spirit" (*blasphemese eis to pneuma to hagion*—3:29), that is, against the very possibility of being forgiven. Here then is an all-out confrontation in which the order of events given by Mark is not intended to imply that Jesus's family deserves the same treatment as one who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit, as has been claimed,[10] but simply that what is at stake is the salvific result of divine mediation: a theological and cosmic battle in the face of which family relationships are no longer of any account. Only the saving mediation counts; that is the one objectual bond against the forces of Evil.

The *logion* about the new family created by Christ's mediation is reported by both Matthew and Luke, and once again as an indirect answer to his mother and brothers who have come looking for him (Mt 12:46 et seq.; Lk 8:19 et seq.). The embarrassing preamble in Mark is omitted, obviously because Matthew and Luke could draw on Mariological traditions unknown to the older evangelist, and the eschatological background is attenuated but not eliminated: in Matthew a vague and pessimistic connection remains with Jesus's activities as exorcist in the preceding similitude of an unclean spirit summoning seven other colleagues for taking dominance over the heart of a man; and in Luke the episode precedes the miraculous calming of the storm and the exorcism of the devils from the Gadarene man. The Gospel of John, using traditions with links to the synoptic Gospels but independent of them, proves as indispensable as ever and reports that "not even his brothers [*adelphoi*] believed [*episteuon*] in him" (7:5), further confirming the historicity of the information. It would appear that the fourth evangelist, on account of his elevated Mariology, transposed the part reserved for Jesus's mother into the enigmatic phrase spoken at the marriage in Cana: "What have I to do with you, woman [*gynai*]?"; the respectful form of address gives this extremely

delicate passage a precisely calculated theological accent. If Jesus's mother comes to be just one among his various relatives in the non-Mariological strands of the tradition (Mark, followed in an attenuated form by Matthew and Luke) and is carefully distinguished from them in the elevated Mariological strands (John), the *adelphoi* remain a problem since their want of faith in Jesus, at least initially, is brought out repeatedly. In spite of that, they appear to present no problem at all to the New Testament sources, unlike modern interpreters who, as we have seen with Garbini, constantly use it as ammunition to demythologize Christian claims about the virginal birth and Mary's virginity, thus showing they share the physicalist interpretations of the most uncritical devotionism. The problem is worth looking into further since it may give us some pointers to understand the vexed question of Jesus's conception.

Unlike the leading figures of the Reformation, all or nearly all Protestant commentators and the majority of those engaged in the quest for the historical Jesus today understand the *adelphoi* of Jesus, mentioned in all four Gospels, Acts, and Paul's epistles, as simply his full or half brothers and sisters, and a Catholic scholar like Meier reaches the same conclusion.[11] This might be partially compatible with the Eastern Christian tradition, according to which the *adelphoi* were Joseph's children by a previous marriage, otherwise unrecorded and unknown, and openly contrasts with the Western tradition, in which the *adelphoi* were cousins or other kin at one remove or more.[12] An extreme defense of the latter standpoint is that *adelphoi* possibly refers to a kind of extended family, not only by reason of the social and linguistic usages of the Near East but also and above all if we appeal to the criterion of embarrassment or we might well say *lack* of embarrassment. If Jesus had had uterine brothers, the tradition of the virginal conception would hardly have arisen in the first century and then taken hold in the second;[13] evidence to the contrary also comes from "brother of the Lord," a title of respect used by the first generations of Christians to generically indicate some degree of relationship to Jesus,[14] though it must be recognized that this usage does not appear in the New Testament writings.[15]

The modern debate on these topics must not be ignored or minimized: on the contrary it has to be developed and analyzed so as to recover the original mediatory dimension of texts and events. Both detractors and defenders forget that if determining who exactly Jesus was depended on

reconstructing the side shoots of his family tree on the basis of scant or absent clues in the Gospels and a few hints from little known Christian writers, the question itself would cease to be relevant; and this is finally the welcome result of Strauss's clean sweep. This confirms the earlier observation about the profitable direction to take for interpreting the *meaning* of Jesus's virginal conception, but also imposes the task of reconstructing historically how the event might have been interpreted at the time. As we already know, in ancient cultures facts, in the rationalistic sense sanctioned by the modern world, simply did not exist—but what was thought of as factual in the field of sexual reproduction?

Ancient theories about reproduction, immensely influential on theological theorizing relating to original sin, were part of an intermedial vision of the act of conception, itself conceived from various quarters—spiritual, cosmic, sympathetic, and magical. Aristotle thought that the male seed was the lone active contributor to reproduction, but since its formative power was derived from the *pneuma* of the heavenly bodies that according to his ontological and cosmological ideas, transmitted the pure act of the Unmoved Mover to lower levels, it was no different structurally from the activities of thinking and knowing.[16] But all transmitting and transforming contacts active at the moment of conception could exert an influence on the unborn child. Besides the heavenly influences theorized and calculated by astrology, there were physical and environmental influences, for example a state of drunkenness,[17] thoughts passing through the mind during the sexual act, or images in the room where it was taking place. Such ideas remained current and the subject of theorizing up to the seventeenth century,[18] and are still found in Johann Wolfgang Goethe's *Elective Affinities* though refashioned on a symbolic and literary plane. That means only one thing: in antiquity, the Middle Ages, and early modern times conception was *definitely not* the biological phenomenon that we consider it to be but a destiny-determining, cosmic event occurring at a point where influences both favorable and unfavorable intersected and operated qualitatively in one direction or the other. Far more than a physical event, it was metaphysical, or rather it was a mediation or intermediation acting in all phenomena, whether physical, biological, or psychic.

Christianity inherited these commonly shared representations, adapted them to its mediatory conception, and thus made them compatible with its

own idea of free will; accordingly, those influences were certainly admitted to condition human actions but not to determine them, remaining subordinate to the general criterion of divine Providence. The problem of original sin, however, was not resolved since the thinking on the subject could only restore a notion of collective responsibility that violated Christian ethics and the Christian definition of individual responsibility. Such an approach was able to make sense of things only in a collective and categorial way, revealing itself to be a theological myth to be all taken up again and reformulated once its defining, stabilizing function was done. Besides, we need only attend to the true significance of these religious and cultural changes and a whole catalog of concepts, otherwise incomprehensible or inimical, springs to life again. The Christian adaptations of previous cosmic-mediatory visions were made possible by defining the absolute redemptive necessity for their mediation, and show themselves as fulfilling objectual needs that with the passage of time were to have the effect of demolishing spiritual and intermedial beliefs about procreation. And so, paradoxically, early Christian convictions about the virginal conception appear to be refuted by the very loss of belief in cosmological, conveying mediations that Christianity's own historical, creatural realism brought about in the long run. The conclusion, which will have to be verified, is that this huge change of paradigm practically compels us to look into the ancient formulations and beliefs and seek a deeper, truer, more intelligible meaning for representations that taken on their own, more than anything else possess archaeological value à la Foucault unless they are restored to the meaningful scheme of which they were part.

In that way all the objections concerning the family status of Jesus vanish: undoubtedly the Christian tradition refers to the literal and physical truth of the virginal conception, just as it does to the concept of original sin theorized by the Church Fathers, especially St. Augustine. But equally undoubtedly, when that truth was formulated and over the centuries of its acceptance it never had the biological and physicistic meaning it has acquired for us. We are not dealing with the same thing exactly; we have to delve deeper therefore in search of a truth of another type, behind what would remain a dead letter if left as it is. Thus we can approach the role and function of Mary, described by the fourth evangelist in terms of a Mariology that is essentially Christological, and thereby ecclesiological.

### 3. The Biblical and Figural Interpretation of Mary

As usual, I will start with the significance of scriptural and traditional data as regards its phenomenological and historical value. This approach establishes the clear emergence of Mary's role, notwithstanding the spiritual and biological complications recognizable in the tradition. These tend to be textual, as we have seen: leaving Mark aside, only Matthew and Luke, in line with the criteria of preministerial Christology that they followed, tell us about the virginal conception of Jesus in the body of Mary, and Luke alone makes Joseph's bride-to-be the focus of his narrative. But already from the first centuries it proved to be enough to give scriptural support to the cult of Mary not simply as mother of Christ but as "mother of God" (*theotokos*), a title worthy of a short reflection for its religious resonance.

In the fifth century such a paradoxical title for a monotheistic religion perplexed Nestorius who, defending the definition of Mary as *anthropotokos* (mother of man), wanted to preserve the humanity of Christ, arousing a fierce opposition among the followers of Monophysite tendencies according to which Christ had only one divine nature, and finally becoming the innocent victim of the ecclesiastical and political fights around the Christological dogma.[19] This is a sign that the *theotokos* title was answering very old and strong religious demands going beyond the real scriptural data. Not by chance, in the legend forged by Nestorius's enemies, but true as regards the reaction of common average Christians, that title was recognized by popular acclaim in 431 at the council held in Ephesus,[20] birthplace of Heraclitus and long dominated by the cult of Artemis, a goddess also distinguished by the attribute of virginity and whose cult was close to that of Cybele, the Great Mother of Asia Minor. Where correspondences with pagan cults are apparent, though partial, they are not to be explained away by the usual comparative leveling-down or minimized by hiding behind the usual differentialist clichés but must first of all be recognized as reflecting an ancient *need* that the Marian cult evidently satisfied quite adequately and functionally since it established itself universally within the Great Church.

The first Marian phenomenon to note is how the story of Jesus begins in Luke and Matthew; in both we are presented with an event with none of the exterior details that might satisfy our curiosity, but rather in its essential structure, its formula. The event is the Incarnation, and the protagonist is

Mary who plays a decisive yet hidden role. To us, the event appears as biblically historical and human, and as such is quite without any eroticism of hierogamic origin,[21] as without any of the violence typical of pagan *mythoi* relating to divine generation,[22] but it will straightway slip through our fingers if we fail to grasp its theological and figural register, steeped in biblical hermeneutics. This fact is often underscored by an iconographical detail in paintings of the Annunciation: Mary is depicted reading the Hebrew Bible when the angel Gabriel appears to her, an allusion to Old Testament passages that Christians over the centuries have interpreted as prophetic of the Incarnation in Mary; among them, the prediction in Genesis of a woman who would trample on the serpent of the temptation, and the passage in Isaiah about the *parthenos* (an unmarried girl, and therefore usually a virgin, in the Greek of the Septuagint)[23] who would give birth to Immanuel,[24] the descendent of David that developed into a Messianic figure in the later intra-Judaic struggles. It should be noted that the iconographic detail refers to the *Old Testament as a whole* rather than to any particular, debatable passages since, from the Christian standpoint, Mary as the incarnation of the Word of God fulfills the Hebrew Bible as a whole. This unexpectedly exegetic aspect of the Marian mediation can be appreciated if we remark the parallel between the Lucan description of the Annunciation and the Judgment of Solomon: in both scenes the crucial point is a meditation on the meaning of motherhood; in the Judgment this is shown by the real mother's willingness to give up everything to save the life of her child, and in the gospel episode by the absolute obedience of a Jewish girl, taking on herself a form of maternity inconceivable to humankind. Mary's maternity is inseparable from the divine wisdom attributed in the Bible to King Solomon, son of David, solely because he attunes perfectly with the overpowering love of the real mother, a love no different in quality from the love of God for his children, the same that moves Mary to receive the life divine within herself.

This figural complex cannot be assessed according to the usual historical and textual parameters although it forms a consistent whole, and when we reconstruct it we observe that it is through Mary and her acceptance that the divine Wisdom, in its *substance* corresponding to the *Logos*-Mediation of the Prologue to John, is fulfilled and becomes our flesh, opening the way for its saving action in history, which is the same as saying in ordinary human experience. From the Christian perspective, the same to be found in

Tuscan Renaissance paintings of the Annunciation where God's infinitude made flesh appears in pictorial perspective,[25] Mary provides the key not only to the Gospels but to the interpretation of the Bible as a whole and to the church founded on it. The history of the church and Christianity is incomprehensible without Mary. However, this takes us onto ground that is both real and figural that we must first regain in present-day terms or we shall lose its power to mediate and signify. The gospel texts that tell us about Mary are not chronicles; they are not relating certain events in the life of a modest Palestinian girl whom we would otherwise know nothing about, and in fact know *nothing* more detailed about, considering the theological importance of the episodes in which she is involved. The Marian *figura* seems to take shape and at the same time it eludes our grasp as soon as we try to draw together its several scriptural and theological threads. Devout efforts at realistic harmonization are, it has to be said, a pointless rearguard action in the face of modern critical awareness and, moreover, fail most resoundingly to achieve their purpose of celebrating Mary since they reduce the Mother of God to a psychological character, her substance and consistency stripped away, to a mere projection, but this time a really mythical one, in the pejorative sense of fantasies and sentiments ultimately devoid of objectual value and so having no mediatory value either. In times when the imagination had an intermedial power unknown today, the apocryphal gospels supplied a need to know more about Mary, along with a number of hagiographic legends; but if we want more Mary in an age such as our own that no longer has at its disposal guaranteed mediations or ontological and cosmic systems, we are inevitably left high and dry, with nothing to show for it. Once again we need to start by listening to what the scriptures have to tell us.

The four Gospels reveal differences and contradictions, some real and others apparent, but all can be successfully dealt with on condition they are not minimized. We will take them one by one, having always in the background the adaptation of the genealogies in Matthew and Luke, which bring us back to an early Jewish and Ebionitic stage of a distinguished but terrestrial descent of the "Son of David," evidently felt not in contradiction with the subsequent theological interpretations. The Marcan account, as we have already said, knows of nothing extraordinary in the circumstances of Mary's maternity, although there is the odd definition of Jesus as "son of Mary" (6:3), which might be explained by the fact that Joseph had already

been dead for some time. Some commentators, however, have tried to ascribe it to unusual circumstances surrounding the birth of Jesus, but there is not the slightest hint of this in the text. We go back to a stage preceding the first Davidic genealogies or independent from them. It is undeniable philologically that Mark describes Jesus's mother, along with his other *adelphoi,* as considering the son who has become an exorcist and charismatic preacher to have gone "out of his mind," which makes it quite clear she knew nothing of any miraculous conception: in the ministerial Christology of this Gospel, Jesus is first acknowledged to be the son of God at the instant of his baptism. The traditions concerning Jesus evidently began with what was best known about him, that is, his public mission culminating in the Crucifixion, while details about his preministerial life filtered through later. The facts may well have been exaggerated and distorted from the very beginning, with legendary details added on, which perhaps explains why the other Gospels seem to take theological and figural steps to ensure the objectual significance of the Christic and Christological mediation. And that means, moreover, that the other evangelists utilized information carefully selected according to its credibility and theological importance. We will look now at the way the other two synoptic Gospels present their Marian data.

In both Gospels the information concerning Jesus's origin and parentage follows the fundamental register of the theophany, the intermedial announcement. In Matthew, the Gospel of infancy, the miraculous circumstances of Jesus's conception are first made known to Joseph; as a descendent of David he has an active role and is the privileged recipient of angelophanies that keep step with events marking the Redeemer's birth and early childhood. There is constant mention of Mary alongside her child, but this emphasis on her role as mother is tantamount to a sort of divine passive bound up with her maternal function. In Luke, on the other hand, we have the real Annunciation, the only specifically Marian angelophany in which Mary is actively involved; the passage is full of intensely meditated meaning but does not fully accord with the following pericope of Jesus at the Temple, where she appears to be in the dark about her son's divine mission. Evidently Luke has adapted a single episode taken from a preministerial tradition concerning the childhood of Jesus, which confirms the symbolic intention of his narrative and also what we said earlier about the stratification of the preministerial traditions. The densely theological texture of the Annunciation in Luke thus

stops it from being seen as the résumé of an external physical event or as a record of a purely individual spiritual experience, which might make sense in today's world but not in the intermedial context of antiquity. The Gospel of John, as usual, presents a peculiar case.

It appears to know nothing about the virginal conception, though the contrary might be suggested by the passage we have already considered in which the Jews hostile to Jesus counter his criticism of their behavior, unbefitting Abraham's children, with the words: "we were not born of fornication [*ek porneias*]" (8:41). The anti-idolatrous sense of the phrase is plain, but given John's frequent use of the technique of the enigma, it might also be alluding to a later period when the Johannine school was at loggerheads with Judaism. And at that time a slander on Jesus's birth, recorded by Celsus in the second century, was probably already widespread; the story ran that Jesus was the illegitimate offspring of his mother's fornication with a Roman soldier called Pantheras, a common enough name among the Roman soldiery but here it puns on *parthenos,* the virgin of the Septuagint version.[26] If this allusion were present, then the tradition of the virginal conception would be known to the fourth evangelist, which raises the question of why he never speaks of it explicitly. An initial answer might be that he was unable to draw on the traditions used in Matthew and Luke, or, alternatively, found some traditions utilized independently by the other two evangelists and unacceptable as being far too exposed to miraculous interpretations.[27] An answer of a more intimate nature, not however excluding the foregoing, is that he wanted to present the datum known to him in more spiritual and theological terms, in a way analogous to what we saw with the sacraments.

Verse 13 of the Prologue, resulting from an addition by the evangelist to the original hymn, sounds attractive in that sense; it speaks of believers in the name of Jesus as "those born not of blood nor of carnal desire, nor by the will of man but of God." In order to identify an explicit reference to the virginal conception of Jesus, the patristic tradition endeavored to understand the subject of the sentence as singular, but the plural is textually certain.[28] However, the possibility always remains that the evangelist altered a testimony about the virginal conception because the verb "born" might seem in conflict with the Prologue's preexistent Christology; it was thus adapted to accommodate those who through their belief in Jesus were born as children of God, while the evangelist left it to be implicitly understood that what was

true for believers was true a fortiori for the incarnate Mediation. Be that as it may, John reasons in terms of a preexistent Christological mediation witnessed in Jesus and laid open to all mankind through him: this exalts the figure of the mother who is never named but addressed by Jesus with the bare appellative "woman," which indicates her role in supporting the Son's saving action. And if we are right in thinking the fourth evangelist and his school knew about the virginal conception, then we can argue that this preexistence is our strongest warrant for a more than human conception, inseparable from the tenor of the teachings and witness of the *Logos*-Mediation. We will take up this idea again when we come to interpret Mary's virginity.

The figure of Mary undergoes extensive theological development in the New Testament, identifying, on the basis of theological-historical data, a type, a *typos* of path in life and experience that starts from a human story, specific and definite in itself, but nevertheless, if taken empirically as it is, it remains mute and opaque. However, if we recognize the textual differences in the various editions and traditions of the gospel and grasp their significance, we avoid making a myth or romanticizing that life story and access a core of experience that can function as an intermediary between the circumstances of a normal, modest biography and some surprising theological developments. And in that regard, the inexhaustible fourth Gospel may well contain a further surprise. In fact, its Mariology is not only the most developed in the New Testament, but since some details of its tradition appear to be of much earlier date, the climactic scene of Mary at the foot of the cross may well be a redrafting of a real event. Christ's action in committing his mother to the care of the Beloved Disciple serves a figural end, but for that very reason it is not incompatible with a real situation in which the two of them drew apart from the crowd that had condemned Jesus and from the apostles that had deserted him. If this hypothesis is correct it opens up a possibility I have already explored elsewhere, that is, it offers a solution compatible with the non-Mariological scene in Mark by suggesting that the importance and meaning of her son's mission was only later realized by Mary.

Hypotheses of this kind perform a heuristic function and are not to be dismissed out of hand. Nonetheless, they are misleading if they seek to justify Mariology on a fact-based, historical plane since, before the modern era, the mediatory mentality did not understand events or actions as objective, material occurrences to be ascertained according to criteria of observation and

documentation of a positivistic kind. What has changed is the underlying logic for processing information, a hermeneutic and phenomenological fact no serious rational analysis can afford to ignore. We must therefore decode the available information according to its constitutive code, and not look to pose questions to which it possessed neither the terms nor motivations. The intention of these remarks is not to detract from the historical value of any information we may have about Mary or other biblical figures but to enable it to be represented correctly; and a further reason is that religious mediations in the texts we are analyzing were the source of objectual existence and hence of real existence, too. So we must always start from there and then determine how much can be reconstructed from documents or by hypothesis as appropriate; and that is because our inquiry needs to be supported by the mediate and mediatory sources providing its material. The modern "fact," inevitably halved and poorer, is not to be eliminated but must be looked for within the overall passage of its transmission. To proceed in any other way would be like prospecting for gold and throwing away the gold-bearing ore; declaring then that there was no gold would add little to rational or scientific knowledge. These observations not only make it possible to reconcile our modern cognitive *habitus* with the necessity for a figural and mediatory interpretation of the Bible, but they show it as indispensable before undertaking any more strictly documental investigation. Moreover, such an interpretation preserves existing data from being consigned to the nothingness of pious legends and mythographic formulations because of the difficulty or impossibility of reaching more positive conclusions. The religious and historical phenomenon transmitted to us must be safeguarded in all its wealth; we come to learn that it is the genuinely precious mineral and not to be thrown away, because it is the signifying source from which we receive the objectual message of a tradition. And so we gain the right perspective for approaching Mariology and the Marian mediation that it transmits to us.

So let us return to the fourth Gospel and Mary's role in the Cana episode. There—with a choice that could hardly be more antibiographical—she was emphatically called "mother," while her Son addressed her solemnly with the bare appellative "woman" (*gynai*), alluding to the distance between them, which is filled by his presence. It is this distance that makes his mother secretly important and here gives the Greek vocative γύναι the connotation of *domina* in Latin.[29] But what precisely is the spiritual dominion that

secretly goes with the title bestowed on Mary by the Son? The answer for Mary, as for the Son himself, is testimonial: it lies in what she does. Her role in the miracle is both discreet and central, just as it is discreet and for that very reason central in the history of salvation, in bringing about the Incarnation. While the text diverges from the other Gospels, Luke in particular, on a literal level, there is agreement on another level, spiritual and figural, but at the same time a real level because the significance of that agreement occurred in human history and regards the conception of the significance of human life. The woman assisting the Son in John appears at this point to be the same Mary who says yes and assents to what the angel of the Annunciation tells her in Luke, her humility making possible the Son's mediation. There is no need for forced agreement between the Gospels since they agree in the message that comes out of their independent theological-narrative reflections.

The figural *and* real significance of Mary in Luke emerges from her final words. They sum up the task she has taken on herself and her motivation, essentially turning all human, external connotations of dominion upside down: "Look at me, I am the Lord's bondservant [*doule*]: let it be as you say" (Lk 1:38). The term δοῦλος, as we already know from Paul and from the Gospel of Mark, means servant or slave, there being no distinction between the two since all menial work in antiquity was linked to slavery. But in the Gospels to be *doulos* of the Lord means to obey his will absolutely and serve him in every way: the servants sent by the vineyard owner in the parable are those slaves of God, his prophets or spokesmen, and the "one well-beloved son" corresponds to the Servant of Yahweh, the special messenger par excellence, the mediator who through meekly serving to the point of laying down his life becomes *the* Mediator. Mary's response to the Annunciation anticipates and concentrates all this in a real figural synthesis of what the evangelist wants to say; and for that very reason it teaches us how to interpret reality, helping us recognize what can be both divine *and* incarnate in human history. The events narrated fall into place on their appropriate level and at last speak to us. Mary's slavish obedience is unconditional loving obedience and as such excludes any subordination or servile submission and comes to receive God's sovereignty into itself. In Luke she acts and obeys without question, without understanding, and precisely by so doing she says what nobody before her had said and understands what nobody before her had understood. Her mystery has its reflection and continuation in the sponsal function and acts

of compassion seen by the church as woman's principle role, a shadowy but essential role that defines the task of the church as a whole, and indeed Mary is its *figura*.

The figural, mediatory, and objectual analysis of the meaning of the Lucan Annunciation allows us to see a connection with the version given in Matthew where, had Joseph not accepted the angel's announcement, Mary's miraculous motherhood might actually have ended in a charge of adultery and stoning to death. There is no trace of anything quite so dramatic in the text, but the controlled narration makes the initial fear perfectly clear, that is, the future husband's fear of scandal being caused by a pregnancy that appeared to anticipate the wedding bells; however, the supernatural announcement immediately puts his mind at rest. This atmosphere of a shameful scandal narrowly avoided makes one suspect that the Matthean version is already framed in response to malicious rumors about Jesus's origins and could be historically compatible with unusual circumstances of his conception.[30] And as for the atmosphere of persecution that immediately envelops the conception, Matthew lays stress on the shadow cast by violence over the revealed light of the Christic redeemer, prefiguring what must befall him and bringing forward the many Old Testament episodes where God's presence is seen in the destitute and oppressed. The association with collective violence, for which sex scandals are an obvious and frequent occasion, is therefore intentional and is not brought out in narrating Mary's conception so as to maintain undisturbed the modest tone and the theological tenor. After the adoration by the Magi qualifying her son as king of a kingdom not of this world, Mary, the mother who has to be accepted and protected by her husband, has to flee to Egypt to escape Herod's massacre, an anticipation, once again figural, of the consequences of Israel and mankind rejecting the one saving mediation. The Gospel of Luke is not far removed from this same symbolism although in keeping with Luke's characteristic sense of decorum his touch is more discreet, as for example when he describes Joseph and Mary finding no room at the inn, at the time "that all the world [*pasan ten oikoumenen*] should be taxed" (2:1). They have to accept a makeshift accommodation where Mary gives birth to a son, laying him in a humble manger (the only detail described).

Considered as a theological and typological whole, none of this completely contradicts even the ministerial Christology of Mark, which still

shows no signs of Mariology but gives us its essential prerequisite, which is, precisely, the ministerial and Christological prerequisite. That is the reason, and it was a rationale as well as a *ratio,* why the tradition has never had any particular problem with this discrepancy or absence of information; it has always taken up these questions at their font, at the highest point of the Christological and revelatory mediation from which the different versions presented by the four Gospels can be viewed as distinct slopes descending from a single mountain. And that brings us straight to the sole, supreme mediatory source of Mariology, to Christology, which we will do well to look into more thoroughly before we investigate the theology applied to Christ's mother. And that, rightly understood, is no more than the study of the human, and maternal, premises of Christology since they were willed and made objectual by God.

## 4. The Christological Importance of Mariology

The New Testament's most advanced Christology is a great help to us in pursuing our explorations, not as an isolated solution to be contrasted with the others but as a largely independent development that throws light on the other New Testament formulations. It has been argued that the Christology in John is so elevated that Christ's human aspects become subsidiary, often making him appear to speak as a preexisting divine being who ignores the emotional reactions of those close to him, dominates events completely, and experiences them only as far as he cares to. Building on these typical features of the fourth Gospel, Brown most acutely reconstructs the position of the dissidents who come under fierce attack in 1 John, who are not to be identified with the docetists characteristic of second-century Gnostic Christology, albeit true that these supported their belief that Christ's death was only apparent by adducing certain passages and themes from this Gospel. Those passages are more in line with ways of thinking typical of Monophysitism, which Brown sees as an implicit risk latent in Johannine Christology,[31] and there are sound historical foundations for his observation considering the split that occurred in the Johannine community and the Christological disputes in the fourth and fifth centuries, but it fails to come to grips with the theological complexity and subtlety of John's ideas.

The decisive premise is always the premise indispensable for understanding how Christology arose and established itself, and that is the religious and historical experience of the *totality* of the mediation of the God of Israel incarnate in his legitimate representative. This mediatory entirety triggers a dialectic of total fulfillment in the here and now, and precisely because it is a total presence offered for the salvation of others, it sets into motion an unprecedented transitivity that qualifies those who accept the mediation of the Christic mediator to become in their turn children of God and thus mediators. Incidentally, the fourth Gospel sets preexistent Christology side by side with remnants of ministerial Christology: evidently the evangelist saw nothing contradictory in such a combination. Christ in John, then, is in every way a historical flesh-and-blood person who for the first time makes the intersection and the saving *coincidentia* between the human and the divine planes fully accessible and, at decisive moments in his mission, speaks and acts *because* he is fully invested with a sovereignty, an *exousia,* coming from the Father and consubstantial with him. For John, Christ is in no way a theological ipseity, a metaphysical hypostasis, as the Gnostic and Monophysite Christologies were to maintain; on the contrary, he is a gateway, an open door, the sole fully historical means of access to objectual salvation: "I am the door" (10:7). We must not expect psychological or narrative verisimilitude for the very good reason that the fourth Gospel's aim is not to present a true likeness but truth itself that has the power to render like itself all those willing to be touched by it. The humanity of Jesus of Nazareth is not diminished by the elevated Christology in John; on the contrary, it requires it and sets it within the dynamic of salvation, the real definition of Christology in John's eyes, a dynamic that could never have taken hold were it not fully incarnated in historical and human reality. He therefore shows us Jesus of Nazareth in full exercise of the mediatory and Christological powers invested in him, of which he was the sole, authorized interpreter, revealing himself in the real world as the divine Mediator Israel awaited and offering the same power to whoever would listen and recognize him. John's Christology thus includes and fulfills other types of Christology, characteristic of other currents of New Testament thinking that he learned about by way of oral and written traditions.

This provides an organic explanation for the Johannine school's distinctive fulfilled eschatology and clears up the highly controversial point of the

impeccability ascribed to all who become children of God, which was probably one of the most serious points at issue between the dissidents and the author of 1 John. This sinless status is not to be interpreted as the acquired definitive perfection claimed by the dissidents,[32] nor does it correspond to the simple, generic need for holiness that Brown believes he recognizes in the theology of the author of the epistle; it simply describes the irreversible spiritual condition in which those who act as children of God find themselves and, to the extent that they do so act, become truly God's children. Impeccability, on the other hand, is the ethical reflection of the fundamental Christological mediation and will always be present since it is one with it. The saving function cannot be saved since it alone saves. The Light illuminates because it is a light of origin, contiguous to and coexisting with itself. The synoptic tradition transmits the Jesuan *logia* about salt that cannot lose its savor and about the disciples as "the light of the world" (Mt 5:13–14), and so warrants that here too the fourth evangelist is taking up and developing a received teaching without any arbitrary additions.

At the same time, at this level of analysis, we come to realize how difficult it must have been to express such a powerful message and not leave it open to misunderstandings of various types; and it has to be said that while he could not eliminate them all, the evangelist reduced them to a minimum. The work of his school also reinforced points previously causing misunderstanding but, lacking the prescience of Christ in John, it could not obviate future misunderstandings. The style itself, with its formulas and reiteration, induces an attitude of spiritual meditation aiming to reduce the margin for hermeneutic error and emphasizing the fact that Christ's mediation is above all an experience. As such it precedes and supports any interpretation, and only converges and coincides with the interpretive plane at an advanced stage, made possible by a preliminary experiential and existential acceptance. The fourth evangelist's faith in the power of the *Logos* was truly great and moreover was not misplaced, considering that his Gospel was preserved, became part of the canon, and survives to the present day.

We avoid *substantial* misinterpretations if we realize that in developing its preexistent Christology the fourth Gospel is not maintaining that the historical person of Jesus of Nazareth *was* God (there is a distinction between the *Logos*'s being "with God," *pros ton theon,* with the article, and being "God," *theos,* without the article),[33] and not even that he simply coincided

with the *Logos*-Mediation, but that he incarnated and performed this theological function, thereby opening the way to make salvation a reality for all willing to follow him. By the second century this function had already come to be interpreted as the second person of the Trinity. The *Logos*-Mediation has something of a collective reality about it, and even as a person of the Trinity it is not to be thought of as an empirical individual but remains a generative, theological function, not to be understood in a functionalistic and instrumental sense. Christologically, the Johannine Jesus returns to the Father so that all may follow him and be one with the Father. The compresence of these planes makes many scenes in the fourth Gospel deeply moving, while the theological language utilized is extremely exalted, but from its height, extends downward and lives in the everyday world. At various points we glimpse superhuman touches of this Johannine Christ; these must always be interpreted in the historical context in which the evangelist understood them and wants us to understand them because they express the absolute Mediation made flesh, which is absolute and fully objectual precisely on that account, because it sacrifices itself for love. This indispensable dimension was partly lost in the theological and metaphysical organizing of the following centuries but remains intact in the text and in its message that is perfectly consistent with the stylistic datum, confirming the realization of the Word in its words.

Once we possess the key of Johannine Christology that completely integrates the historical figure of Jesus and the total Mediation that is his, the real significance of Mary's figure emerges clearly, no longer disguised and distorted by mythical incrustations that correspond to losses in the objectual significance of the original Christological mediation. Such losses in mediatory processes are as inevitable as side currents and standing pools in a river, but they appear more accentuated due to the increasingly problematic nature of religious mediations in the modern era. This is not necessarily a sign of their weakening; it can mean they grow more intense and are confirmed if the more problematic mediation includes and explains that process; its mythographic consequences then become accessory and ephemeral in the face of an objectual content making headway in their midst.

There is thus no danger that Marianity will replace Christianity since even our present inquiry, which aims to be phenomenological and historical and abreast of the more advanced understanding of the subject,

confirms that Mary's theological function is indissolubly bound to the Son and always relates to him and to him alone. The shadowy nature of her figure as Christ's mother only serves to emphasize her function as being to assist and mediate, in the sense that structurally her mediation refers to Christ's mediatory dimension. Not only is there no need for biographical information, inessential in any case for understanding the spiritual value of her figure, but it is actually better, necessary even, to have only the bare minimum required to guarantee the experiential reality of the process constituting the Marian mediation, a mediation vicarious as no other and for that very reason femininely supreme, the complete fulfillment of the female mediation, not showing woman's vicariousness but, through her accepting that vicariousness for love, the female and maternal face of God. In this way, human, objectual expression is given to the female, maternal side of the archaic Yahwistic divinity, a side that had been obscured in the long, concealed history of ancient Judaism and prevented from showing itself by the atmosphere of sacrifice, but then partially emerging through Hellenistic influence and the Platonic doctrine of *eros* as intermediary between man and the divine, which the Song of Songs assimilated into the most profound Judaic doctrine. Garbini's idea that, through the influence of the highest Greek spirituality, Judaism discovered the real face of God as love is fundamentally correct, but it took the Christian mediation to fully comprehend and express it, achieving its maximum expression in the Christological Mariology of John.

Having confirmation of these comparative assumptions helps us to understand the sense of epochal change in the nuptial symbolism of the Cana miracle, and in the Mariological and ecclesiological scene of Mary and the disciple at the foot of the cross. The wedding of Israel is the union of Judaic and pagan culture in a single mediation of love, the mediation opening up for anyone willing to be reached and transformed by it, with a view, however, to the fateful moment of the "hour." Mary at the foot of the cross is once again addressed as "woman" (*gynai*) (19:26) with a following reference to the "hour" of the Son (19:27), which shows how this married love is fulfilled and the way in which Greek *eros* is purified and made sublime by a total abnegation that makes the pure objectuality of this love understandable. And this extreme objectuality of love, giving up every single object rather than falling short of itself, represents the living transmission of the real continuity

between Israel before Christ and Israel after Christ. If the Beloved Disciple came to represent the model of the perfect Christian *in figura,* and as such inspired the composition of the entire Gospel, Mary came to represent the real Israel that never abandoned Christ, and the church as well, in its future developments continuing the work of salvation begun by Israel. Not without an essential nuance, though it, too, was obscured but not obliterated by developments in the Great Church: the nuance given by Jesus from the cross in entrusting his mother to the care of his putative son, signifying thereby that individual believers—not merely as individuals but as subjects within the dynamic, saving reality of the *Logos*-Mediation—have the church in their charge and must work for its realization through their loving acts. Few other scenes are as figural as this, but the historical datum, far from being excluded, is reinterpreted, mediated, and made objectual starting with the historical and theological significance of the Crucifixion: "Woman, behold your son!"—"Behold your mother!" (19:26–27). What we are seeing here is an inversion of the Old Testament episode of the Fall, with the cross in place of the tree and Mary in the role of a second Eve whose obedience overturns the temptation and what it represents:[34] the predominance of violence and the destruction of the human object.

It needs to be stressed, however, that while this figural interpretation of Mary, attested from the second century, fits best into the theological construction of the scene in John, it is not backed by simple documentary evidence alone but finds support in a mediatory rationale beginning with the Prologue and embraces a perspective as vast as human history itself. To understand the force of the episode in John it must be read in terms of the meaningful transitivity that it receives and transmits, in the significance of the presence of Jesus's mother during the Passion, and in the *substantial* inseparability of her figure as Mother and the figure of her Son. Thus we arrive at what was to be a decisive step not only for the development of Christology but also for the evolution, over several generations, of the Trinitarian conception of God, to which Mary bears a profound and hidden relationship that can be traced back to the many layers of the monotheistic God of Judaism, and to the feminine word *ruah,* corresponding in Judaism to the Greek *pneuma,* the spirit conceived as an intermedial force accompanying Yahweh, substituting and perpetuating the archaic goddess that had been his consort.[35]

In speaking of the *substantial* relationship between Mother and Son in the Crucifixion as recounted by John, the italicized adjective emphasizes the almost technical value attaching to what theologians would come to define as *substance* (οὐσία) common to all three persons of the Trinity, when they use a term that means "essence" in Plato. Of course, the New Testament contains no direct trace of a *terminus technicus* like *ousia* used in the sense it had in classical Greek philosophy, nor in the sense it was to have in post-Nicene theology; and yet, in itself whether past or future, it is to be understood in its constitutive semantic core, linked to the theological, existential meaning of the verb *einai,* set out with such power in the Prologue. Having begun with Mary and her relationship to the Son, we unexpectedly find ourselves in the middle of the most rarified speculations in Greek and Christian metaphysics, but this is quite in line with the Mariological tradition of the Virgin as *sedes sapientiae* and should come as no great surprise since Mary, objectively and objectually, is at the center of the ideas expressed in the Prologue, in which the *Logos*-Mediation is made *sarx,* is made flesh. Entering into these convoluted theological and metaphysical reflections might appear to take us a long way from the humanly more circumscribed symbolism of Mariology, but on the contrary they lead us to its most hidden substance. This assumes a brief and singular history of the Greek category of *ousia,* whose hidden meaning is revealed and unraveled in another experience, known already but always to be discovered and rediscovered.

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The mature Christian theology of the fourth and fifth centuries came to distinguish *ousia* from the more Christological notion of nature (*physis*) and the Trinitarian notion of person (*prosopon* or *hypostasis*). However, it would be a distortion to interpret this substance as the substratum or substrate of the three persons or hypostases of the Trinity since it still possesses its Platonic and Aristotelian meaning of "essence," understood as what makes an entity what it is, without having lost the ontological dynamism of Parmenides's Being (*to eon*), thereby giving the lie to Heidegger's charge of a lapse into the ontic or into onto-theologism; an ontological dynamism coming from Parmenides was not in fact lost in Plato, again disproving Heidegger's contrary reconstructions, while for Aristotle *ousia* also took on more analytical significance both as a material substratum (*hypokeimenon*) and as a formal

definition due to the classifying value that ontological language was beginning to have for him, though it was never separable from its full ontological sense.

I would emphasize the connections and osmosis between Greek and Christian thinking but would not wish to create a reductive illusion of continuity between the two since, without a shadow of doubt, the Christian revolution of the Incarnation, giving pride of place to an unknown Palestinian girl and an obscure rabbi from Galilee, would have appeared patently absurd to a classical Greek philosopher, as it does to the Roman patriotism of the Middle-Platonist Celsus. But what appears strange and even inconceivable to a whole cycle of civilization, since it shifts its pivotal point of objectual definition to what was not previously objectual, is precisely the sign of the break in the cycle and of its moving on in other forms, toward unexpected frontiers. That a consubstantial relationship obtained between the finest concepts of Greek speculation and the birth of Christian thinking is confirmed in the *ousia* of the Trinity where the ancient meaning given by Parmenides to τό ἐόν as totality of Being can be recognized, transformed but not misrepresented. In Plato, this totality of Being transcends *ousia* in a more ontic sense, not because it negates *ousia* but because it is implemented as the totality of the Ideas, hierarchically subordinate to the unifying Idea of the Good and present and participating in reality as a whole. Aristotle, on the other hand, organizes the same totality starting from the unifying first principle of the Unmoved Mover. Without doubt, the Trinitarian *ousia* is the Christian version of the Greek totality of Being since everything has its origin in the Trinity and finds its completion and destination there, but it includes the pivotal event of the Incarnation making it the absolute, complete Mediation. Hellenic philosophy could not attain to this since it maintained the axiological separation of full Reality from its single manifestations, which remained subordinate to it. Neoplatonism's assertion that the One went beyond Being was intentionally anti-Christian, moving in an antiontological direction primarily meant to deny the Christian incarnation, a controversial trait fairly indicative of the significance of antiontological thinking today, exemplified in the last century by Emmanuel Lévinas, who substantially ignores, in its substance, the profound mediatory and conceptual assimilation that went into the making of Western civilization. Mary's modest yet essential role in all this is not explainable since as a single event

it is coincident only with itself, but it is understandable and provides a key to understanding. However, we have yet to arrive at the specific essence, the quintessence, of the Christian *ousia*.

The theological and ontological developments of the Trinity are consistent with what had already been set out in the Prologue to John, though the post-Nicene speculative language is not to be taken as a finished definition but as the symbolic and conceptual expression of a divine mediation that is ontological in the ancient acceptation of *einai,* tending to synonymity with *zoein,* to be alive.[36] Thus the Christian God's totality of being, both conceptually and linguistically, is alive and is the source of life. The real meaning of the *ousia* of the Christian God, that *is* the Christian God, is given us by 1 John: "God is love" (*ho theos agape estin*—4:8). Here the verb *einai* is inseparable from the other two terms and expresses a relationship already virtually Trinitarian since it joins the first two terms in a reciprocal relationship where the first noun, *theos,* corresponds to the vertical moment of transcendence and the second, *agape,* to the revelatory, incarnate moment of the Son whose union with the Father is expressed by a verbal and ontological copula open to all who desire to be part of it. In the Johannine vision, this love is the substance, the very essence of God, and the same substance is incarnated and realized in Mary.

It cannot be said that the formulation in 1 John, indissolubly bound up with the Prologue and the entire Christology of the fourth Gospel, has ever been properly grasped. Philosophers have shown indifference to the speculative and ontological relevance of these conclusions because they see Being either as having no affective connotations or as something to be transcended, though to what end is not exactly clear, while theologians have largely neutralized 1 John 4:8 by representing it as being particularly daring but as having nothing to say about the real nature of God, since love is an attribute of God, not a definition. And here we really must adduce Heidegger's criticism that Platonic-Christian metaphysics were onto-theological. This corresponds to the abstract drift of a philosophy that has now forgotten the original tenor of its mediations, fundamentally the objectually impoverished metaphysics of late Scholasticism and Catholic thinking of the more repetitive, superficial kind. Commentators for their part look for any textual minutiae they can cling to, so as to steer clear of philosophical considerations, and even theological ones to some extent. There is no great harm in this as long as it relates to

the philosophy and theology I have outlined here, but it ignores the semantic context, and ultimately the historical context, of the texts being anatomized. On the one hand, the indifference of philosophers and theologians to the author of 1 John's equating of God with love can be dismissed as thinking that is untrue to itself, as happens with onto-theology and with Heidegger himself in his fight against it, as if *philo-sophia* were not nonmetaphorical love of wisdom and Christian *theo-logia* were not the *logos* of a God-*Logos* made flesh for love. On the other hand, however, it has to be said that the exegetical difficulties ought to be examined more closely to determine if they are real or result from inconsistent and incomplete interpretation.

There is fierce debate among commentators as to what the Johannine school really means by love, especially in reference to the epistle where he has been thought to mean brotherly love between members of the community as opposed to those who dwell in darkness and are to be excluded from that love. These are the internal dissidents, defined in the epistle as "antichrists," and their position is similar to that of the Jews in the Gospel from whom the community had separated. This confrontational definition would appear far from loving, and all the more so when we consider that the fourth Gospel, unlike the synoptics, does not explicitly teach forgiveness of one's enemies,[37] but the true meaning becomes clear when seen in the overall context of John's theology. This mutual loving really knows no exceptions and cannot but be universal since it expresses God's inner life, the achieved, indestructible objectuality of his Mediation incarnate in his Son.[38] The problem was that the Johannine Christological Mediation stood so absolute in its completeness and fullness that it inevitably led to separation from the Judaic communities in the first place and to the subsequent disputes over interpretation that such a stunning Christology was bound to give rise to. As a consequence, the absolute nature of the Christological Mediation of love entailed head-on confrontation with those who rejected it or interpreted it dangerously, that is to say, in a less balanced, less objectual way. Its supporters equated those positions with the sin against the Holy Spirit of the synoptic tradition, the sin of refusing love, an unforgivable sin because counter to forgiveness itself. That, then, is the context in which the polemical language of the fourth Gospel and 1 John has to be seen, as answering the threats to the very survival of its Christology and lesson of love. And its characteristic contrast between light and darkness ought not to be absolutized, because

it subsists only to the extent that hardened hearts lend substance to it by rejecting the light and retreating into darkness.

To sum up, the love spoken about in 1 John is not at all an attribute of God and draws a deep divide between definitions of an attributionistic, ontotheological kind and a definition in which the apparent attribute becomes substance and appears as the sole generating, creating substance of God, in which not only humanity but all creation may fully share because this is its substance and purpose, its full reason for being and its objectual end. The substance-love that is with God and is God, and is witnessed on earth by the Son, is the *ousia* in all senses, including the distinctions arrived at by Aristotle's genius for analysis, discerning the substance as substratum and material. The substance of the Christian God that Mary made visible on earth is the *subiectum* become *obiectum,* the substratum revealed as apogee, matter rising to become spirit, and personal properties shown to be the undivided source of the person, of Persons. We seem to be aloft in spheres of abstraction and highly imaginative speculation, but love is neither abstraction nor imagination; it is a life experience that either is or is not, a statement of fact before which all else vanishes, and it helps us comprehend how Mary is the mainstay of Christian love, the real hidden condition for its historical and existential truth, which prompts further reflections on the mediatory meaning of the experience of love that infallibly take us back to Mary.

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The love that Christianity talks about is above all else historically and anthropologically real, and we can and should perceive its glimmerings in created reality as such, otherwise it would be impossible for divine love to find expression and be received by its creatures.[39] Love, then, is the quintessence of the mediation, although it may remain filtered and hidden in the far from lovely recesses of human mediations; and that, however, implies a ubiquitous, constant presence of love in historical cultures where we might go so far as to say that all manifestations of hatred and violence are only expressions of love defensively denied, affective positions aiming at the complete destruction of whoever threatens them. And besides, in the animal kingdom, we already find displays of affection externalized at a family and group level within the context of a ruthless and unceasing struggle for survival; and this is a glimpse of a mediation still waiting to find the traumatic, disclosing

threshold of objectual focalization, a threshold whose unlikelihood and savagery can never be overstated, an eternal rejoinder to any mollified view that will recognize neither the potentially infinite value of such a leap forward nor the strict necessity that it was brought about by an explosion of animal instincts intensifying until the biological barriers were breached and a new homeostasis suddenly crystallized. Thus it is not a question of setting violent and positive or loving tendencies side by side but of recognizing in both the presence of a single force, variously named according to the level of complexity at which we find ourselves, whose point of homeostasis must be determined each time, finally arriving at the critical transition to culture. And here the maximum concentration of destructiveness has led to the maximum creative breakthrough, able to introduce a symbolic factor of perceptive, representative, and cognitive retroaction—all stages of growing complexity in which the emotions are an essential ingredient, an elementary expression of the essential intentionality of the human being, of its constitutive direction toward the object. Utilizing complexity theory, we can reconstruct the more general causal structures of this process and, with the help of phenomenological philosophy, its mental and conceptual organization; however, it remains inconceivable and abstract unless we set at its very heart the ecstatic-objectual experience that brought the mediatory and mediating experience of transcendence into the animal kingdom. This general observation unites and coordinates science, philosophy, and theology at the single point of focus and intersection that made all of them possible.

Returning to the phenomenon of love within the natural, paleontological, and historical framework proper to it, these observations already suffice to make it clear that there is an unknown history of love that has yet to be written as far as I know. And in it the figure of Mary reveals its most unexpected and profound aspect, the anthropological aspect, summarizing in itself the unknown history of a human love, but not only human since it relates, on the one hand, to the love of the divine mediation and, on the other hand, to the love already active in the world of the living. Between the two there runs a line of tension, and at the midway point the Christological price paid for the transition from one extreme to the other. This has been variously intuited, by Girard with his idea of the victim, by Bataille in his experience and idea of *depénse,* and by Simone Weil in her representation sacrifice as a primitive Dionysian mediation willed by God. This history of love restores

the more collective, impersonal aspect of the maternal Marian *figura,* at the same time retaining its more personal and individual aspect. Through Mary the very essence of the female mediation and its role in human civilization speaks to us.

Mary at the foot of the cross is not just a mother weeping over her son, or rather she is, but in a way so creaturally figural and so universal as to bring to light something that had remained unfulfilled and hidden until then: the human capacity to suffer for love, to transcend the antiobjectual plane of violence and, through the violence suffered, tap into the very conditions of human objectuality. And the anthropological *and* theological truth of Mary at the foot of the cross could also come through in terms of her being outside the circle of persecution that had closed round her son, a circle she had no real possibility of breaking into because of her socially inferior status as a woman of the people, indeed simply as a woman. As a consequence of this circumstance all the Gospel episodes in which women have a major part stand out more vividly, and their anticonformism and humanity can be traced back to another sure trait of the historical Jesus; on this particular point we can agree with Garbini but not with his further superficial speculations. We might even say that just as there could have been no Christianity without a woman, so without women it would have had, and would now have, no future, since its destiny is inseparably bound up with the female mediation; and the church is the visible reflection and invisible reality of that mediation, the *domina* whose rule is service, the "Mother of Saints, / image of the Heavenly City" of Alessandro Manzoni's hymn *Pentecost.*

The detail of Mary's nonparticipation in persecuting and punishing her son comes essentially from the fourth Gospel, and it must have something to do with the so-called Marian privileges. These came to include the theological idea of Mary being exempted from original sin, an idea debated for centuries that was formally recognized by the Catholic Church in the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, not to be confused with Mary's perpetual virginity or Christ's virginal conception. But does this extraordinary exemption also have any anthropological and historical value for us? And how does it relate to Mary having no part in the Passion, which is simply taken for granted by a large part of the Christian tradition since she was, after all, without sin?

Mary's position outside the persecutory circle of the Passion, outside the tragic circle in other words, can be interpreted in Girardian terms, which I

have done in the past,[40] though the persecutory exception described in John robs Girard's all-against-one scheme of its clarity, not so much on account of Mary's presence since as a woman, she counted for little at that juncture but because the enigmatic Beloved Disciple is also present, in marked contrast to the narratives of Mark and Matthew. In the succinct Marcan account, followed by Matthew, all the disciples deserted Jesus at the time of his arrest;[41] in John the Beloved Disciple keeps faith to the very end whereas Judas betrays him and Peter denies him, while the other disciples do not flee but are simply absent at the moment of crucifixion:[42] the fourth evangelist has probably modified an archaic account on the Passion according to his own theology. It is impossible to disregard the symbolic-narrative strategies peculiar to John, or the differences from the synoptics where the Beloved Disciple does not appear. Are we to deduce therefore that for the fourth evangelist, there is no tragic experience of all against one, that the Passion is real but without tragedy, and that there is sacrifice but without the unanimity of the sacrificers? And how do the other evangelists see this, especially Luke who also makes no mention of the disciples' unanimous desertion of Jesus?[43]

The question is important, first for evaluating Girard's premise that the revelatory significance of the Passion lies in its highlighting the mechanism of unanimous violence against the victim, and then, more importantly, for understanding the relationship between the evangelists' theological viewpoint and our modern anthropological perspective. Besides returning us to the anthropological context from which we gradually moved away in discussing the mediation of the *Logos* made flesh, this will help us gain further insight into the meaning of Christian historicity, of which the Passion comes to be the Christologically fundamental focal point. Consequently, the question is also fundamental for the *figura* of Mary and her vicarious but illuminating role in the Passion. To avoid misunderstanding the work of analysis and reconstruction being carried out here, with its continual switches between historical-exegetic reconstruction and historical-speculative reflection, one must keep in mind that ancient philosophy had systematic reference to a performative and ontological dimension of concepts that to us appear unilaterally abstract; Christian thinking, for its part, draws on an event in which performativity itself becomes the source of all other ideas. And it is precisely to the conclusive and originating event of the Passion that the scene of Jesus's arrest takes us, following the interval of performative reflection at the Last

Supper during which Jesus is still immersed in himself. Analysis of the arrest as variously described by the four evangelists reveals the differences in their strategies and also allows us to take a further look at their Christology in statu nascendi, so to speak.

## 5. Jesus's Arrest: Christologies Compared

The abandonment of Jesus by all the disciples, in Mark, is historically plausible and reflects the evangelist's theology based on the systematic contrasting of Jesus's mission with the incomprehension shown by his followers, stubbornly maintained even at the sepulcher when the angel tells the women that Jesus has arisen and is not there, and they "were trembling with amazement [*ekstasis*]," and said nothing to anyone about it (16:8). The fact that this is probably the final phrase of the original text as it has come down to us suggests that the Gospel ended on a note of hope but also of continuing difficulty in understanding Christ's real nature.[44] In any event, aside from any hypotheses about the text of the *Ur-Markus,* the theme of the secret Messiah also appears at the apparently triumphal stage of the Resurrection, leaving it up to whoever receives this announcement to choose to comprehend it, and understand one way or another a still uncertain and suspended *ekstasis,* more than ever open for us to choose.

The clear-cut, provocative contrast in Mark is developed in Matthew according to more explicitly Christological criteria. When a disciple cuts off the ear of a servant of the chief priest, Jesus responds with the saying that those who live by the sword die by the sword and adds that his Father, should he request it, would send "more than twelve legions of angels" to defend him (26:53). This hyperbole is twofold—the celestial nature of the angelic legionaries and the exaggerated numbers of their legions—and serves to illustrate the total difference between human brute force on one level and the *dynamis* of Jesus's Father on another. And perhaps, if we think of how many legions of angels the Father would have had to send, and would still have to send, to defend the victims of the countless acts of tyranny and oppression throughout human history, there is no more poetic comment on the events of the Passion. However, angels are ultimately envoys, bearing in mind that their weapons are not visible, and what identifies them is not a

distinct, independent status but, as Origen stresses, their function as *angeloi,* as messengers, a function all believers in Jesus should carry out.[45] But for this to happen, it is necessary to insist on the transcendence of the sender of the message and of its faithful bearer, Jesus, who has accepted persecution like the prophets before him. In Matthew, as in Mark, the disciples' desertion comes immediately after Jesus has referred to the fulfilling of scripture because they cannot conceive that what is happening fulfills the promise made to Israel; by way of underlining their exegetical and existential mistake, Matthew adds that it fulfills "the scriptures of the prophets" (26:56), recalling a specific theological line, the prophetic persecuted Israel, as opposed to the Israel that bowed to the power of priests, scribes, and Pharisees—in a word, to the Temple. As Matthew understands it, the real Israel chosen by God is not the Israel that appears to have history on its side but the Israel that, even if it abandons and betrays, never forgets who it has abandoned and betrayed and so remains open to conversion; and this view is substantiated by the theological-historical vision of the dissident Temple priests that was adopted by Jesus. Since all men abandon and betray, the dynamism of sin and repentance extends to the whole of mankind, and all are called on to be the real Israel.

Is it correct to speak of an anthropological revelation in the stark manner in which the first two Gospels present the abandonment and persecution of Jesus? And if so, in what ways precisely? We must pause for a moment to reflect on this before turning to the other two Gospels and analyzing their particular slant on the scene of Jesus's arrest.

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Plainly, for the first two evangelists there is no question of setting out to illustrate an anthropological mechanism providing an immanent and scientific explanation of how human societies and cultures function. Their aim is to present a theological contrast between a creatural reality remote from God, deaf to his appeals, in which demons are the antiobjectual exponents, and God's creational, saving reality in which all who hearken to the announcement of the Kingdom may enter and share. But for this to become possible, the Son of God must live out the drama of that conflict and bear witness to it, and so make it intelligible to men and women, opening a way for them to break free from a *kosmos* subject to the devil's power logic. There is, then, a

theological and cosmic process, and it is fulfilled in human history, but this is so because human history is inscribed within a vaster history, the history of the *katabole kosmou* of Matthew 13:35, that is, the history of the creation, the fall, and the salvation that is to redeem it. Behind this vision there can be sensed the conflict between the forces of Good and Evil that came into Middle Judaism through the influence of Zoroastrianism during the Persian period[46] and was subsequently developed into an orderly set of laws using the Greek notion of *kosmos* so as to become the laws ordained or permitted by God.

It is hardly surprising that a vision of such explanatory and consolatory power was taken to extremes, in the second and third centuries, in the total metaphysical antagonism between Good and Evil upheld by the Gnostic movement and Manichaeism. Both left the historicity of Christ's mission and witness behind and lapsed into dualistic formulations that split apart the inspiring, unifying drive characterizing Jesus's proclamation of the Kingdom. Dualism as a category requires some critical rethinking since every ancient religious and philosophical vision remains axiological and refers to a superior reality (known or unknown), in respect to which inferior realities fall to a defective level and finally reach the level of a nonbeing which is eo ipso a disvalue regardless whether it is conceptualized in ontological terms. It is possible to keep the category of dualism in that dualism is a mediation not entirely mediating that keeps an unresolved residue of opacity and objectual negation. This proved a problem that not even official Christianity could completely resolve because there remains in it the tension of a part of creation in definitive rebellion against God and doomed to eternal damnation. However, the problem was faced by a spiritual Christianity that was not officially recognized, such as that of Origen, who conjectured a universal salvation of all the creatures devils included (*apokatastasis*),[47] and Dante, as we shall see when we consider the *Divine Comedy*.

It is symptomatic, however, that the more extreme and gloomier speculations of Augustine and later medieval theologians about original sin and the *massa damnata* of humanity are there in the background; but as soon as they are compared to the salvation announced and witnessed by Jesus Christ, man and Son of God, they show themselves for what they are, with their theories about sexual reproduction and physical propagation by means of Adam's seed, namely, as historically conditioned experiments in theology.

Despite all the metaphysical speculation, there is always a historical core to the Christian vision, but historicity as we understand it is only potentially present; the foreground is always held by the mediatory logic of the task fulfilled by Christ and by the need to put his mediation before all the wicked mediations of this world. So it is not a question of identifying an anthropological mechanism to substantiate a theological framework but of starting from that framework and coming to understand processes that for us are intramundane phenomena to be understood on their own terms. On their own, however, they are unable to accede to a saving mediation unless it is there from the beginning and actively pursuing its inscrutable ways. And for this "in the beginning," *en arche,* as John says, there must be mediation, the Mediation.

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So we can now also correctly interpret Jesus's arrest as it is presented in the two remaining Gospels, without futilely contrasting Gospels supposedly containing an anthropological revelation with those thought to have none. Events in the third Gospel unfold in a similar way, but it all translates into teaching, dramatically delivered live by the master to his disciples who are bewildered and slow to comprehend. The sword and severed ear episode becomes the questioning of Jesus by an unnamed disciple wanting to know if it was permissible for them to use weapons; Jesus's reply is short and sharp: "Enough of that!" (Lk 22:51); and he then miraculously heals the servant's ear, an action recorded only in Luke and serving to demonstrate the lasting effectiveness of Christ's mediation. There is no mention of abandonment by the disciples because their discipleship as such continues more than ever now that it is seriously endangered and under threat from the powers of this world; but in their very act of usurpation they make Christ's teaching graphically real and operative. This explains why the evangelist needs to include a question seeking instructions about the use of weapons that makes Jesus's reply immediate and performative, essentially all one with his attitude and miraculous gesture in healing the wound inflicted by the sword of a still-uncomprehending disciple. And for the same reason, immediately after Peter's denial and the crowing of the cock in the courtyard of the chief priest's house, the narrative has the added detail of Jesus turning and just looking at Peter as a silent reminder of what he had said before, provoking the disciple to tears of repentance for

his denial. The Passion is not the final failure, the end to Christ's teaching, but its highest moment, and nothing of his words and witness is destroyed; his defeat in this world and the incomprehension and desertion of his followers are implicit in it, but all is condensed in divinely didactic terms. Jesus himself expresses this in his words to the officers who come to arrest him, speaking for everyone to hear: "it is your hour, it is the power [*exousia*] of darkness" (22:53).

Teaching is a central element in the Lucan Christology, and it defines both the method and the purpose of Christ's mission as preannounced in the episode of Jesus among the doctors. And this didactic purpose helps us to understand Luke's pacifism, never a banal propaganda version designed for use by the devout, nor a refusal to face up to harsh realities—indeed, we are not spared appalling glimpses of the predominance of evil among mankind. Rather it is a continuing quest to see things from God's forgiving, ever-open perspective, made known to the third evangelist by Jesus. The Passion is the fulfillment of this educational program, prepared to face martyrdom in order to teach its final lesson, a lesson far from being ex cathedra since it teaches superior comprehension and supreme forgiveness, and it continues right to the end: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (23:34), and to the absolution given to the repentant thief. That is an astonishing detail, telling us that the very first person to be saved by Christ and to be brought with him to heaven that same day, was a confessed criminal, as the previous dialogue with the other thief makes clear.[48] This educational Christology that is at the same time a Christological education appears in a condensed form when Jesus is questioned before the Sanhedrin, and he explains the failure of all human education to his inquisitors: "'If you are the Christ, tell us.' But he told them: 'If I told you, you would not believe [*pisteusete*]; and if I also asked you questions, you would not answer me'" (22:67–68). The situation in the Temple where the twelve-year-old Jesus was asking and answering questions "in the midst of the doctors" (*en meso ton didaskalon*—2:46) is dramatically reversed and shown to be impossible; and so those Renaissance paintings depicting Jesus among the doctors as prefiguring the Passion are fully relevant as exegesis.[49] And yet, in this situation of total educational defeat, the divine origin of Christ's teaching and the fulfillment of scripture that amazed the doctors in the Temple are revealed, which is why the *Christus docens,* more than ever *docens* in the suffering predicted by the texts, having

declared the failure of human education immediately caps it with a Messianic proclamation pre-Lucan in its features. The reply that follows could not be more Christological, taking up the *nomen divinum* communicated by God to Moses in Exodus and containing, as I see it, an ingenious translation of Parmenides: "'Henceforth the Son of man shall sit at the right hand of the power [*dynameos*] of God.' And they all said: 'Are you then the Son of God?' And he answered them: 'I am'" (22:69–70). From then on, the preeminent, decisive sign of God's *dynamis* was to be this performative teaching of those who suffered violence at the hands of men in order to testify to another power, a power of another kind, capable of loving and forgiving even in the direst circumstances, indeed especially then.

The description of the arrest in John shares some common features with the Lucan version, because of common materials and comparable theological purposes, so much so that their similarities do not extend to other parts of the Passion.[50] In the fourth Gospel Jesus is the preexisting Son of God who knows exactly what is going to happen to him and is in full control of the situation. When a veritable army is sent to seize him (it requires no less to arrest the Son of God) and he asks who they are looking for, the rabble of soldiers say Jesus the Nazorean (perhaps with a connection to 1:46, where the reference to his place of origin has a tone of contempt[51]); Jesus immediately identifies himself with the crypto-Parmenidean theonym from Exodus: "I am." At this, the band of soldiers, fully armed and determined though they are, back away and fall to the ground, a demonstration of the *dynamis* of the real name of God. Thus there is an *amplificatio* of the tradition utilized by Luke and also confirmed by the shared detail of the severed ear of the chief priest's servant being in both accounts the right ear. However, as well as the absence of the *Christus docens* theme, further evidence for the fourth Gospel's independence from the third is the omission of the miraculous healing of the ear; if this detail were present in his source the evangelist is unlikely to have left it out. On the other hand, at the end of the episode, it is quite striking to find the names, only to be found in John, of the disciples who inflicted the wound and the soldier-servant he inflicted it upon. The servant would appear to be named in order to reassure the reader of the incident's historicity, and the name itself must have come from the material used by the writer. However, the fact of identifying Peter as the aggressor is less easily interpreted, as it could be related to a tendency to underscore the distance,

spiritually speaking, separating the chief designate of the apostles from Jesus, but without questioning his position as leader, evidently a historical fact. The question of names is anything but nominal as we already know, and as we are about to see.

The most notable difference between John's version of the arrest and that given in Mark is the latter's reference to abandonment by *all* the disciples, which is followed in Matthew and not explicitly ruled out in Luke. Placed immediately after the soldiers fall senseless to the ground on hearing the Christological theonym pronounced, and immediately before Peter cuts off Malchus's ear, there is a repetition typical of John, sufficient to induce the reader to a *ruminatio* on the words of the *Logos* made flesh: Jesus again asks the soldiers who they are looking for, and when they repeat their answer, he replies, "'I told you: I am he. If you are looking for me, let these go.' This was said so that the words he had spoken might be fulfilled: 'Of those that you gave me, I have lost none'" (18:8–9). Jesus repeats his divine name, and so emphasizes his Christological identity, not out of proud differentiation but out of loving care: the Son of God wants to save his followers from suffering any consequences of involvement in his arrest. He is the Good Shepherd who lovingly calls and leads every sheep; or rather, he is the gateway to the fold (10:7: "I am the door," with a series of anaphoras explaining the *nomen divinum*), which fits perfectly with his function of bringing in the sheep and so saving their lives. But this total commitment means that the Good Shepherd fulfills his task and reveals his divine nature by giving his life for his sheep and calling on them to form a single flock led by a single shepherd: "It is for this that my Father loves me, because I lay down my existence [*psychen*] and then take it up again. Nobody can take it from me, but I myself lay it down. I have the power [*exousian*] to lay it down and I have the power [*exousian*] to take it up again: and it is from my Father that I have received this commandment" (10:17–18). So now the Good Shepherd carries out this order and implements the words his disciples had not understood.

We can now see why the evangelist felt the need to name Simon Peter and Malchus in the wounding incident. Their human names are set in contrast to the divine name of Christ, whose words and deeds identify him as the inextinguishable source of life: Simon Peter, the assailant who to the very last misunderstood the word of Jesus in good faith and was prepared to deny him, and Malchus, the servant he struck who joined in attacking

the Son of God and revealed all the weakness of his flesh. But there is a further symbolic subtlety: officially registered human names represent an insubstantial temporary identity and stand in contrast to a divine name—I-am—which is essentially anonymous, corresponding as it does to a pure function of love that has its being in relinquishing and giving and, by dint of that supreme disregard for its own existence, bears witness to a superior plane of reality, a substance that is not of mankind. Christ's gesture in John of letting his saved sheep go signifies this loving transcendence as compared to the human obtuseness that clings to its own existence, betraying and obscuring the light divine by the mere fact of existing as it is, closed in on itself and thus unable to shine and transcend itself. Abandonment and betrayal by his sheep are already contained in Christ's choosing to let them go, and in choosing to lay down his life he himself accepts this beforehand. And thus he acquires the supreme power of losing none, that is, of wanting to condemn none, because the task of the Light is to shine and spread its light. For the fourth evangelist, the spiritual experience of Christ's Mediation, which is with God and is God, is so powerful he needs only to name or evoke it and there springs to his mind the infinite contrast with the frantic muddle of human incomprehension and the moral savagery that is its dismal outcome. There is no dualism in this, not even residually, since the Light divine conquers, penetrates, and disperses the darkness from within, and simply by coming into contact lightens it.

There is therefore no need to describe all the human wretchedness of Jesus's abandonment and betrayal since there are sufficient allusions skillfully distributed throughout the story of the Passion and in its premonitions placed at the end of the Book of Signs. Before Judas's betrayal and Peter's denial, Caiaphas pronounces his famous words about it being opportune that "one man [*anthropos*] should die for the people [*laou*], and the entire nation [*ethnos*] not perish" (11:50), which is a particularly brilliant example of John's irony since the high priest's cynical reasoning in terms of national interest does indeed come true but in a contrary sense, in Christ's accepting to redeem humanity. This is explained by verses 51–52, a gloss by the evangelist or the final editor that assigns Caiaphas's words to the biblical category of unintentional prophecy, whose fulfillment would not only prove advantageous for the nation but would "gather [*synagage*] together into one body God's scattered children." That implies a saving action universal in scope and

probably also contains an allusion by way of contrast to the synagogue from which the Johannine followers had been expelled following their adoption of an elevated Christology incompatible with traditional Judaic belief.[52] And the undoubted framework for all these references in John is Jesus's overall prediction of the turn that events would take when his "hour" should strike, summing up and concentrating the scandal set out by the synoptics in a more dramatic and narrative form: "Behold, the hour will come, indeed it has already come, when you will be scattered, every man for himself, and you will leave me alone; although I am not alone, since the Father is with me" (16:32).[53] This being one with the Father amounts to being misunderstood and abandoned by men, according to the existential and theological movement that the greatest texts in the Old Testament refer to, but the fourth Gospel, like the other Gospels in their different ways, reminds us that the prime factor in making such situations recognizable and effective for salvation is a divine Mediation of love that can enable us to reach the human objectuality of those rejected and downtrodden by the rest of mankind. "In the beginning was the Mediation": precisely, and for the fourth gospel it was a purely theological mediation, and *that* is why it took the form of a history that turns out to be all history. From a modern standpoint, on the other hand, mediation is primarily an original, originating experience that can be explained in immanent terms, at any rate in terms corresponding to the emergence of something irreducible, phenomenologically compatible with the Mediation of the Prologue.

The two viewpoints, the early Christian and the modern scientific-philosophical, must not be confused with each other but brought into dialogue, leaving readers to draw their own conclusions without wrongly introducing predetermined theories or other ideas that happen to coincide with their own assumptions, and at the same time considering the problem of a content of knowledge that can be transmitted to us, an objectual acquisition that can be translated into our language and adequately demonstrated independently. In that respect, the fourth Gospel with its more developed Christology proves a particularly reliable touchstone since we cannot arbitrarily isolate in it any content that is more anthropological in respect to its more theological developments; the two are inseparable, since both derive their revelatory and objectual significance from the same source. Similarly, the less elevated Christology of the synoptic Gospels can misleadingly

suggest a greater degree of realism, in line with the old historicist assumption of Strauss who wrote off the fourth Gospel completely.[54] As a matter of fact, the secret is not to overlook the theological and biblical dynamism of Christology when understood as the supreme thematization of the divine mediation as it can and does appear in history, as it was actually worked out in the religious melting-pot of Middle Judaism, in dialogue with categories inherited from Greece. The central concern of Christianity's founding texts is always Christ's mediation and its plenary and sovereign power to save, and it is this that brings human history into view as the history of the origin, of questioning the human object—the human objectuality—and, through God's help, achieving it.

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As a result, the scene of the Crucifixion in John cannot be taken as a theological symbol without history or historicity or as an anthropological fact understandable in itself and showing us, in Mary and the disciple John, the only two exceptions to an immanent universal law of violence and persecution. And if their two *figurae* cannot be seen as simple religious abstractions, neither can they be interpreted as individuals exempted from a perverse process in which all human beings comply; and it is just as pointless to try to interpret their position as some miraculous, spontaneous exception. In John's view, those who have no part in the world's darkness are not the ones to whom a mysterious, gratuitous privilege is granted, but to those who put themselves in tune with Christ by accepting his Word of Life. That is, they undergo a veritable experience such that they no longer belong to the world, or rather, to the demonic mediations that dominate the world. For Jesus and his followers, as for the Johannine community, those mediations had objective consistency, enjoying an intermedial existence that was without real ontological autonomy but was for that very reason dangerous, since it needed to be constantly threatening human beings in order to derive a semblance of objectual existence from them that would bring it closer to divine existence. There is no separate anthropological plane, left to its own immanence, since everything is determined by the struggle between the divine mediation and the demonic mediations. Man stands in the middle and must make a choice on which his eternal life depends, which is not, however, to say there is no anthropological content that can be put in terms

easier for us to understand. Quite the contrary, what guarantees men's freedom of choice and makes their entire existence meaningful is precisely the total presence in Christ of the divine mediation. This also helps to explain the absence of miracles of exorcism in the fourth Gospel, since they have no place in the solemn, liberating framework of John's Christology. There is no need for this Christ to chase out demons; his entire person, his presence, is an accomplished, definitive exorcism, the greatest of signs, which it suffices to look on to be rid of all poisons and infections, like the Hebrews in the wilderness when they saw the serpent of brass (Jn 3:14–15). The conclusion to be drawn from this is that everything in John is anthropology precisely because it is all theology, which is another way of saying that everything in his Christology is human objectuality because it is all mediation.

In the light of the above, which applies not only to John but affects our understanding of the other Gospels as well, we can now go back to considering the historical and symbolic significance of Mary, and of the women who silently speak to us through her.

## 6. The Anthropological Significance of Mary

The Gospel account of the Crucifixion, once it is set in motion and applied to history as in our treatment of the scenes of Jesus's arrest, becomes a key to recognize what human history has systematically suppressed, a fully and humanly manifested phenomenon of what had been hidden before and revealed only in rites and in the horror of ritual victims. With the figural key to interpretation, we can perfectly identify human situations that show themselves as prefiguring an objectual truth they had yet to possess, that had still to reach them. This occurs in a particularly concentrated form with the Crucifixion in John on account of its figural density and of the presence beside the Son of his Mother along with the Disciple to whose care he had entrusted her. And it is a figural key in which male and female mediation integrate and strengthen one another quite wonderfully, their mutual give-and-take reinforcing and perpetuating the exchange, as with the transitivity of the Trinity in later theology. This prompts some further thoughts about human objectuality taken in the creatural historicity of the two sexes that compose and refract it.

In Christ, it could be said, the male mediation—the element historically necessary for his message to be accessible—is fulfilled publicly insofar as it is total obedience to the Father: the Son puts all his energy into finding an Object that constrains him to give up all other objects, a transcendent Mediation that orders him to offer himself as sacrificial Object for the salvation of many others, in fact of all mankind. This means giving up his own male identity, which Jesus freely agrees to do in order to achieve a higher object, as appears from the *logion* recorded in Matthew about "eunuchs, who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake" (19:12), an expression that has driven our present-day mentality into every conceivable misunderstanding. The notion of "eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake" has nothing to do with demonizing sex as intrinsically bad, though Jesus himself may have had strict views on the subject due to the potentially demonic idea of sexuality that developed in Judaism as it strove to break free from the sacrificial rites of hierogamy and the *molk.*[55] Unlike other eunuchs, whether congenital or castrated, these voluntarily eunuchs offer their entire male condition, their virility, with a view to achieving a divine Mediation that is neither male nor female and for that very reason opens up complete objectual fulfillment for both. The saying has to be historical: it is so forceful, so much against the tide, and yet so consistent with the view of marriage attributable to Jesus,[56] not to mention the parallelism that is the stylistic marker of other Jesuan *logia.* And it offers a fundamental link to the figure of Mary since virginity is her eponymous attribute, inseparable from motherhood in her case. In this twofold connotation, and in its vital connection with the mediation of the Son who became a eunuch for the Father's mediation, virginity reveals its generative significance.

All ancient theories about sexual reproduction fade into the background and disappear in the face of this significance, which actually emerges more clearly now that concepts scientifically inadequate for our present state of knowledge have been overcome, and also because demonization of sex has become a thing of the past, though there is ample evidence to suggest its objectual potential is still far from being understood. Today we can fairly conclude that there is not the slightest condemnation of human sexuality in Mary's virgin motherhood; on the contrary, it enhances sexuality, since—according to current scientific data—the female reproductive apparatus *must* be utilized. And yet this observation is still too material, with a risk

that the old demonization of sexuality is too hastily stood on its head and so as to become sanctification. The unpredictably liberating power of Mary's virginity is quite another thing, it seems to me, and consists in the possibility of absolving human reproduction from the original sin with which it is tainted according to Christian tradition, and which we can interpret as deriving directly or indirectly from the violence involved in any of its objectual realizations. And here, Mary's fecund, generative virginity, through her loving self-sacrifice, opens the way to transcend every bond and double bind between human sexuality and violence.

This reveals another aspect of the virginal state attributed to Mary, a spiritual aspect that is normally overshadowed by the sexual connotations however they are understood. The decisive factor in her virginity, and in all Christian virginity, is not purity, which is always open to equivocation and easily made to appear as something unclean; nor is it innocence since we need only think of it and immediately it takes on less innocent taints of affectation and the fear of losing it; decisive, rather, are the total renunciation of the object, which is found again in another form precisely because it has been renounced, and foregoing the objective dimension of satisfaction and possession in order to accede to an objectual dimension that becomes permanent to the extent that detachment from the objective sphere is confirmed and becomes meaningful. And this is the underlying reason why Mary's virginity must be perpetual. Virginity is not negation but affirmation, not condemning what one is preserved from but preserving oneself from all condemnation, not rejecting the flesh but redeeming it. It is Mary's virginity in fact that evinces her Motherly role to prepare and help with the choice made by the Son. She lives in secret what the Son makes manifest and recognizable. It is not the Mother's virginity that makes possible the Son's but his that makes visible, mediates, and renders objectual her virginity. The Passion and the Resurrection crown and illuminate the Annunciation, and not vice versa. Real chastity, real virginity consists in giving one's life for others, foregoing all other objects in order to attain the Object.

This also sheds liberating light on the objectivity and objectuality of human sexual identity. To take the measure of our ideas we need to return as always to the supremely Christological, Mariological, and ecclesiological presentation of the Crucifixion in John where, it could be said, Jesus sacrifices his masculinity and his very life to accomplish his Father's mediation,

fulfilling it beyond all imagination since in that way he found eternal life and the definitive object, and acquired the power to transmit them to others. An unthought-of vista opens up in which gender identities are fulfilled by being given up, becoming the intermediary for a total transitivity that nothing escapes because it gives up everything, freely adopting the underlying creatural condition common to all as its basis. To his Disciple and Mother at the foot of the cross, the crucified Christ who suffers such a cruel death for love and is therefore raised up and glorified designates reciprocal love as the new motherhood and new child–parent relationship within the community of believers in Jesus, no longer men and women in that they give up all sexual and physical identity held out as an exclusive possession, but men and women more than ever in giving themselves to each other, in taking on any role that love requires. And thus the *logion* to be found in Mark about a new family identity coming from acceptance of the Kingdom is realized, in terms of both Christology and Mariology.

This opens up new perspectives for Christian theology, bringing out unsuspected potential in traditional data that have been jaded by repetition and fossilized under the appearance of a conservatism that in fact conserves very little. And there is another aspect to return to, the anthropological and historical *praefiguratio* that now becomes identifiable starting from Mary's figural and mediatory significance, mediatory in the sense that it prepares and conduces to mediation. When we unravel the Christic and Christological phenomenon through time, along with the Marian and Mariological phenomenon, the historicity in all its manifestations is at once evident. Beside and beneath the *figurae Christi,* in the Christian view preparing and anticipating the coming of Christ, there are in fact more modest and invisible *figurae Mariae.* These become visible when we have Christ as our interpretive key, and they tell us that mankind's extremely long history, though it did not—and never could—evolve in a peaceful or linear fashion, was something more than a continual series of violent, senseless upheavals, due to the transcendence of its objectual achievements compared to the suffering and death that constantly threatened to cancel them. That is why, within that history, even at its darkest moments, there is an objectual residue to be brought to light, even if it only takes the form of transcending its crushed, destroyed significance. Our guide in this, as always, is the image of Mary at the foot of the cross in the Gospel of John.

All mothers who have not abandoned their children when victimized by injustice and violence are remembered and redeemed in Mary who does not abandon Jesus, whether they be mothers bereft of their children, as in the massacre of the innocents in Matthew; mothers pierced by swords, as predicted for Mary in Luke; or mothers crushed by the overriding power of officialdom or the mob, as happens in the Passion. And next to the mother who weeps but does not abandon her son, we should place the wife who does not abandon her husband, whose heart goes with him onto the countless battlefields to which social mediations ruthlessly dragged and drove adult males. This heart-rending theme recurs again and again in Greek literature, especially in the *Iliad* and the Euripidean tragedies based on the Trojan cycle. From Greece, it passed over into the Jewish world where, translated into religious terms, it humanized the Yahwistic mediation by developing its female and maternal aspect. The Marian *figura* shows us an aspect of female and human experience that is too often overlooked or made banal; and that, absurdly enough, explains why this accumulated experience of suffering has no place in the identity of the modern emancipated woman. She is thus doomed to being a poor copy of what woman has been for thousands of years, indeed for hundreds of thousands of years if we care to include all human species before and parallel to our own, none of whom could have survived without the resilience of the family and the division of roles and objectual spheres between male and female. As soon as we project the figure of Mary back in time, from history as we know it into the dark and boundless millennia of prehistory, its significance is revealed as infinite, and light begins to glimmer in that utter darkness, giving us a glimpse of the human and not only in a paleontological sense.

The planes of anthropology and exegesis converge singularly in the Marian figure, which points to human objectuality as the significant core of history and scripture, as the real noumenon of all human phenomena. As with many figures in the Bible, though with a subdued intensity peculiarly her own, Mary is presented through the barest of details; consequently, their overall significance, the experience full of truth and silence to which they relate, can only be understood if we allow ourselves to be penetrated by their hidden meaning of humanity, a humanity humiliated and crushed but ultimately victorious, in anthropological terms because these tenacious bonds of collaboration and love enabled mankind to survive the countless

catastrophes of human history, and in religious terms because the God of the afflicted and oppressed who speaks to us in the Bible, the God developed by Israel's greatest thinkers drawing on the spiritual wealth of Greece, decided to stand by woman who is wife and mother, to become incarnate in her and realize the mystery of his presence in her. Following this historical and figural logic, would it not be possible to discern in this anthropological *and* religious significance the germ of the belief that the mother of God was without mankind's original sin, without the sin man committed at the beginning? Mary comes in fulfillment of Israel's expectations, not so much because she outwardly fulfills a series of prophecies groundless when viewed outside a Christian hermeneutic that is as forced as it is hopeful, but because the love for aggrieved and devastated human life that constitutes the greatness and the enduring legacy of Judaism and its scriptures becomes a reality in her person. The connection between Mary and the Holy Spirit who causes her to conceive Jesus in the Lucan account of the Annunciation, fulfilling an ancient Yahwistic latency, is to be interpreted in that sense: the same *pneuma-ruah* descending on her as on the apostles in the Pentecost episode described by the same writer, an account that appears to be a post-Paschal enlargement on the tradition utilized by John for the Crucifixion scene.

What I would like to note, in thinking about the surprising agreement between often quite dissimilar scriptural texts, is the mysteriously deductive, rational character of Mariology, the firmly grounded product of centuries of reflection as if it needed much time and many generations to cross over the threshold of silence and modesty that distinguishes everything about Mary. And it holds good for certain truths lying deep in the structure of our experience of existence, truths that have sunk in over a span of many lifetimes and if expressed *apertis verbis,* unaided by their maturation through time, would not be understood.

The figural historicity of Mary emerges clearly if we look at her theological and scriptural aspects without any phenomenological bias, numbing devotionism, or unrealistic psychologism. Only in this way can the comparative argument fully display the majestic power in Mary and bring out the secretly rational nature of Mariology. The very analogies noted by Celsus between the conception of Christ and myths in which a woman mates with a god demonstrate the significance of the Christian event. What made it possible was the freely given assent of this young woman, accepting the real nature

of God and the real mediation capable of realizing man's objectual greatness. The self-denying sacrifice of the real mother in the Judgment of Solomon thus finds its fulfillment. In light of the comparative evidence the scene of the Annunciation in Luke acquires historical depth by making visual the anthropological truth of the doctrine of the second Eve. The many Pasiphaes forced to give birth to their Minotaurs find their redemption in Mary, as do the countless women condemned to be prostitutes and sacrificial victims, and those metamorphosed as hounds, wolves, and other beasts, degraded into the ambivalent, monstrous beings in which Greek mythology abounds, as we can see in the *Bacchae*—monsters that breed, bear, and kill monsters. It is Mary who redeems Agave from the horror she had to perpetrate and when she unwittingly slaughters her son Pentheus, and for Agave, she recomposes the scattered limbs of her son's dismembered body.[57] In Mary the infernal rites of hierogamy are cancelled out, and there is redemption for the prehistoric mothers sacrificed with their children, born and still in the womb, and for the infinite number of women abducted, raped, and murdered throughout human history. Mary is woman's authentic liberation, not the modern version burdened by resentment and violence but the liberation that fulfills woman's spirituality, her maternal love, a love that redeems not only womankind but mankind as well, through the son she bore who incarnates God's *logos* of love and through the man who agrees to live with her in Matthew and save both mother and child from the violence threatening them.

So we may safely assert that the Incarnation enacted through the mother of God redeems the human body and its sexuality, providing humanity with the possibility of survival. Mary is the living sign of millions of years of human history in which the human species could not have existed if the family had had no defense to prevent its destruction by sexual conflict and rivalry. And that is why when this Jewish girl said "yes" it was a figural event fraught with spiritual significance and yet inseparable from its physical significance since both come to constitute the objectual significance of the human being, of being human. And it is also the reason why Mary's name has always been associated with the supremely objectual attributes of mercy and forgiveness from which none are excluded: "mother of mercy"; while "our advocate" once again connects with the Paraclete and pictures Mary in the role of defense lawyer on our behalf before God, the judge and chastiser, a mythical symbolization behind which lies a secret hope for a different

experience of divine mediation.[58] The objectual character that emerges from these symbolizations is of Mary as mediator, interceding on our behalf as she did at the marriage in Cana, not because she placates God's wrath but because her figure and life show us what God's mercy consists in and the way for us to obtain Christ's intercession. Her secret is expressed in a simple phrase given to her by the fourth evangelist: "... do whatever he tells you" (Jn 2:5). But the entire Marian tradition in fact contained this secret of Christian spirituality and preserved it, until the very heights of spiritual awareness were reached, not in the modern world but in the medieval world of courtly love and the Dolce Stil Novo, the formative background to Dante's poetry.[59]

The forgiveness traditionally associated with Mary leads us to the eschatological aspects of her mediation. These were firmly rooted in the tradition and deeply felt and meditated by Dante. But before turning to the *Divine Comedy* to discuss the Mariological concept of the afterlife that Dante develops there, I would like to bring in another term of comparison. Surprisingly enough, it concerns Greek philosophy at its most visionary and daring in what it has to say about female mediation and its significance for salvation. From our investigation of Mariology we find ourselves catapulted back once more to the underlying fundamental stage of Greek philosophy, and to be precise, to the very beginnings of what would later be called ontology.

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In discussing the Marian mediation and its eschatological aspects, we should not overlook the role of divine female mediations in ancient concepts of the hereafter. In Sumerian mythology this role was linked to the sacrificial rites of hierogamy, a connection that continued in Greek religion in its best-known form as the abduction of Persephone staged in the exoteric part of the Eleusinian Mysteries. In this Persephone was transformed into the goddess of death, a mythical event deriving from the sacrifice of female victims consecrated to Hades, who was also the brother of Dionysus especially in sacrifices of this type, as Heraclitus remarks.[60] However, Greek knowledge did not simply absorb these funereal and sacrificial associations passively, as Parmenides's epic poem exemplifies, where the Proem shines out with unexpected light when read in parallel with the Marian mediation. Parmenides imagines he is riding on a horse-drawn chariot escorted by the Heliades, the daughters of the Sun, taking him toward the Gate of the ways of Night and

Day. An unnamed Goddess awaits him there and greets him in the following manner:

> And the benign Goddess welcomed me, and with her hand my right hand [*cheira de cheiri*]
> took, and began to speak, saying:
> "O youth [*kour'*], with immortal guides,
> brought by horses to our House,
> hail [*chair'*], since it was not an adverse fate [*moira kake*] led you
> by this path [*hodon*], far indeed from the way trodden by men,
> but Law [*Themis*] and Justice [*Dike*]. You must learn all [*pythesthai*]:
> both the heart that does not shake [*atremes*] at well-rounded Truth [*Aletheies eukykleos*],
> and the opinions [*doxas*] of mortals in which there is no real certainty [*pistis alethes*];
> but that too you will learn, how the things that appear
> it was necessary for them to really be, being all in all [*dia pantos panta peronta*]."[61]

Research particularly attentive to the religious symbolism of the Proem has established that the goddess here is none other than Persephone, the queen of the dead, referred to in fact as the goddess without a name or generically as *Kore* (girl) since it was considered unpropitious to name her.[62] Her gesture of taking the poet by the right hand comes from the papyri of the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* where the god Anubis leads the deceased by the hand, and presumably reached Parmenides through some Orphic-Pythagorean intermediary.[63] Up to this point we would still seem to be in the world of myth imagined by Orphism from which Parmenides derived the atmosphere of a journey of initiation into the world beyond the grave; the term *kouros* evokes this mystery-sapiential dimension designed to teach the right *hodos* as opposed to the "way trodden by men" that the initiate must avoid.[64] However, the youth in the poem is no longer a dead Orphic using his magic pass, his *symbolon,* to secure salvation in the afterlife but the author himself who is alive and undertaking a journey at the origin of the work the reader is about to read, a circular movement intended to involve the reader in reliving the same journey. What we see here is an archetype that was to

recur for thousands of years in Western philosophy and literature, from Plato's *Republic* to Dante's *Divine Comedy,* down to the great modern novels of which Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* is one of the last examples. The most remarkable circumstance for readers in antiquity, and it appears even more remarkable for modern readers, is that the goddess of death speaks in person to the youthful initiate, greeting Parmenides kindly and leading him by the hand on a journey that becomes a mental journey, where what is at stake is not only reaching absolutely incontrovertible certainty, indicated by the word *pistis,* but permanent freedom from death. Parmenides must in fact learn "the heart that does not shake at well-rounded Truth," which is the Truth whereby what-is as a whole is and cannot not be, and whereby "things that appear," that manifest themselves, unquestionably are because they are "all in all," in that they belong to the only ontological reality that is and cannot not be, gathering into its "well-rounded" totality the individual beings from the moment they appear until their final decline, that remain in that reality without passing from "is-not" to "is" or from "is" to "is-not," as the "men with two heads" (*dikranoi*)[65] believe, convinced that things can be and not be. And so death is eliminated, in an operation of amazing conceptual profundity when we consider that thousands of years later Einsteinian physics came closer to understanding what Parmenides intended with his concept, where time has no independent consistency in relation to space and matter/energy but is inseparable from them, consequently also banishing any appearance of birth and death in time. The idea had in fact reemerged before Albert Einstein, in Baruch Spinoza. The single entities in his system are none other than modes of the infinite divine substance, of which men can feel themselves to be an immortal part once they have attained to the *amor Dei intellectualis*.

Moreover, we are talking about ancient Greece and, at this point in our inquiry, it is not hard to see how Parmenides's symbolism draws its most powerful images from sacrifice:[66] Truth *eukykleos* recalls the *kyklos* of the maenads circling round Pentheus; the heart *atremes* essentially means "intrepid" and is not so very far from the archaic connotation of the sacrificial victim's heart as it ceases to beat;[67] and the *dikranoi* men are mythical monsters indicating the threat of an extremely serious objectual crisis. Nonetheless, this archaic and bloody symbolism is not here to demonstrate slavish dependence on a world of sacrifice to which there were no alternatives but to serve a third

end, beyond the leveling-down found in modern interpretations taking no account of the dramatic situations experienced in antiquity and successfully dealt with to set up the object. Parmenides sought to reach a dimension of *pistis* in the sole reality of what-is so unshakeable that all sacrifice would be made superfluous and mankind would be released from the nightmare of violence and death for all time.[68] That his clear-sighted dream never became reality or, at least, never brought about the changes in men and the *polis* that he intended detracts nothing from the value of his project, not only as speculation but also in terms of its spiritual and moral worth. And it is vitally important that the real speech about the way-that-is comes from the goddess of death transformed into a goddess of deliverance from death. It is as if all the female victims ever sacrificed to the god of the afterlife speak through Parmenides's goddess and proclaim release from the toils of death not only for themselves but for all mankind. There is an element of grandeur in this that even seems somewhat prophetic. The Parmenidean *eon,* later described by the goddess as enchained and "immobile, shackled by great chains" (*akineton megalon en peirasi desmon*),[69] strikingly anticipates the mediatory figure of Jesus on the cross to whom, in John, all turn for salvation as they did to the serpent of brass.

Undoubtedly the aim, objectual and for salvation, is basically the same, but in Greek philosophy it still remains too compact, referring in any case to the *kosmos* and its laws as an undifferentiated whole; and at the same time it is still too divided and detached, with its several parts remaining distinct and not fully reversible in each another, as can be seen in Plato. Breaking with Parmenides's compactness (his "parricide"[70]), Plato identifies a divine, ultra-cosmic, spiritual mediation but then finds himself unable to give substance to his idea of a totality of what-is effectively realized in the soul and experience of man. In order for that to happen, a female mediator was needed to guide this movement toward salvation, to become its headquarters, ensuring that completion of the mediation between the hyperuranium and sensible matter was firmly anchored to the mystery of the Incarnation. As a consequence, Mary herself takes on all that is necessary to perform as intermediary for salvation in an eschatological sense as well, that fulfills with a fully objectual interpretation the sapiential, saving function performed by Persephone in Parmenides's Proem.

## 7. Mary as Eschatological *Figura*

From Parmenides and the birth of Western ontology, we must pass directly to the Middle Ages and Dante's conception of the Christian afterlife. There would be a great deal to say about the Marian and Christological significance of the beloved lady in Provencal poetry, in the *trobar clus,* its most elevated spiritual tradition, inaccessible to the uninitiated. In this allegorical poetics, the female figure takes on the value of a Christic symbol, or vice versa, as the *belle dame sans merci* she becomes an allegory of the official church, hostile to overmerciful interpretations of the Christian message. The poet nonetheless continues to be enamored of the church and endeavors to express his Christian faith in the guise of profane love poetry. This tradition was taken a step further in Tuscany and made *dolce* by the poets of *stilnovismo* whose "sweet new style" was truer to human experience, translating the language of allegory into the intermedial and psychological experience of being in love, an experience regarded as prefiguring love in its highest form, the love of the poet's soul for Christ. Dante in his turn transformed the Stil Novo conception of courtly love into a grandiose scheme for the renewal and restoration of the two major pillars of the medieval world, the universal mediations of the church and empire, which he felt were seriously endangered. In writing his "sacred poem," the *Divine Comedy,* his aim was to salvage both church and empire, historically and spiritually. At the outset of his journey into the Christian afterlife, Dante's guide, Virgil, the *figura* of pagan knowledge, "with a joyful face" (*con lieto volto*) takes him by the hand, a gesture that goes back to Parmenides and ancient Egypt, and so initiates his introduction "to the secret things" hidden from the living.[71] In this Christian *mundus imaginalis,* which gives us the authentic measure of Italian culture, Mary's role is crucial but discreet, in character with her mediation; not appearing as the beloved lady herself, she is nevertheless always present as a hidden focus, pointing to the mediation of Christ in the form of spiritualized love for the lady. A sort of triangle is set up, in truth a movement circling around three points that are the intermediation of Mary, salvation through the grace of Christ, superimposed figurally on the beloved, and the experience of being in love, with its Christological analogies brought out by likening the torments of love to Christ's suffering on the cross.

We can assert, then, that Mary is the cornerstone of the *Divine Comedy,* and also of the next world as Dante conceived it, developing the biblical idea of divine judgment as the individual's self-judgment, in the face of the divine mediation made secretly accessible by Mary. This becomes clear in the Proem of the *Inferno*, the second canto, when a series of female mediations leads up to Beatrice being mobilized for the poet's salvation. But before that, in the first canto that introduces the *Comedy* as a whole, Dante appears as a *figura* for all mankind describing how he lost his way in the "dark forest" (*selva oscura*) of evil and was unable to reach the hill of salvation because three beasts blocked his path.[72] These beasts are symbols of human evil in three of its manifestations and are progressively more bestial and so further removed from the divine mediation; it is only with Virgil's unexpected help that Dante manages to flee from them. In the second canto, in answer to doubts raised by Dante, Virgil explains why he has come there, and as he speaks everything becomes marvelously clear if we can understand the secret interwoven in his words, hinging on Mary's intercession and revealed step by step. He has come to Dante's aid at the personal request of Beatrice who descended to him in limbo, like an unforeseeable theophany:

> I was among those who are suspended,
> and a lady [*donna*] called to me, so blest and beautiful [*beata e bella*]
> that I placed myself at her command:
> her eyes shone more brightly than a star [*lucevan li occhi suoi più che la stella*].
> She began to speak to me sweetly and softly
> in an angelic voice in what she said [*con angelica voce in la favella*].[73]

This is not a courtesy call on the part of Beatrice but courtly love fully manifest in the realm of eternal punishment. Her eyes shining "more brightly than a star" and her words spoken "in an angelic voice" are not a promise of salvation; they *are* already salvation the instant they are seen and heard. When she finally introduces herself, her divine provenance becomes clear:

> It is Beatrice who sends you on your way [*I' son Beatrice che ti faccio andare*];
> I come from the place I desire to return to;
> Love moved me, and makes me speak [*Amor mi mosse, che mi fa parlare*].

When I am before my Lord,
I shall often praise you to him.[74]

Just as she is no mere visitor, so Dante's Beatrice is not simply God's guest but is one with him. Love alone moves her and only for Love she speaks, and this Love is not different from God, it is none other than God, because Beatrice is the Word, the *Logos,* the Mediation of God, and her relationship to her Lord is expressed by praise ("praise of the true God"—*loda di Dio vera*—Lucia calls her in II, 103).[75] Beatrice is Christ himself, who descended into hell and dissolved it by his presence. The key passage occurs at this point, when Virgil asks Beatrice why she has not avoided descending into the depths of hell:

But tell me why you did not keep [*la cagion che non ti guardi*]
from coming down here to this center
from the spacious place you long to return to [*ove tornar tu ardi*]. (II, 82–84)

When Virgil says "this center" he is not only referring to hell but to the whole Earth that occupied the lowest part of the universe in the geocentric cosmology of antiquity and medieval times, and was dominated by the generation and corruption that Aristotle talks about and by the mystery of evil that is spoken of in the Bible. In the first place, then, this underworld is the Earth, but Beatrice-Christ has chosen to descend into it to bring about the salvation of humankind, who need only look and listen to be saved. And Virgil is showing himself to be worthy of the trust placed in him, impatient though he is to obey the lady "blest and beautiful." His question is of extreme theological relevance, yet strangely enough, like a magic spell, it has passed unobserved by countless commentators obliviously skimming through these pages in their impatience to reach the infernal adventures of the following cantos, whereas the real essence is to be found here. Beatrice's reply is a complete theological summary, a brief treatise on Christology:

Since you want to know so much in depth [*tu vuo' saper cotanto a dentro*],
I'll digress briefly—she replied—
and say why I'm not afraid to come down here.
We need only fear those things
with power to harm others;

not other things, since they are not fearful [*paürose*].
God, by his grace [*sua mercé*], has made me such
that your wretched state does not touch me [*che la vostra miseria non mi tange*],
nor any flame of this fire burn me [*né fiamma d'esto incendio non m'assale*].[76]

Virgil's question means that he wants to penetrate the supreme divine mysteries, to enter already into "the secret things" himself; and it is this that qualifies him for his imminent role as guide. That this role should fall to a pagan poet shows us the significance of the praise promised by Beatrice when she returns to her Lord: Christ's mediation is immediately effective, and the human intellect, represented by Virgil, is ready to receive it and respond. The final words spoken by the object of Dante's love—"your wretched state does not touch me"—appear to stress the unbridgeable gap between the spirit relegated to limbo and the courtly lady, but in fact the exact opposite is true. Beatrice has just said we need only fear things with power to harm *others* not ourselves, and it is this unbounded readiness to love others and sacrifice oneself that defines the Christological mediation incarnated in her. This unbounded readiness to love means that hell dissolves the instant Beatrice-Christ appears there. So there is no hell, as soon as Christ's love comes to dwell there, which normally does not happen since hell is essentially dominated by the absence of love, hate. Hell is a world without transcendence because it is loveless, but if love is present its infernal underworld character vanishes at a stroke and is replaced by heaven and eternal bliss.

Where there is Christology, Mariology is bound to follow. Beatrice adds that she was mobilized to descend into the underworld because Mary called on her, through Lucia (from *lux,* light), the "enemy of all who are without pity" (*nemica di ciascun crudele*) (II, 100), to go to the aid of Dante, of mankind. The name of Mary is not actually pronounced since it is alien to the infernal sphere, just as Christ is never named in *Inferno;* nonetheless it is at once apparent in the repercussions of the crypto-Christology just set out:

There is a gentle lady [*Donna è gentil*] in heaven who feels sorry
for the ordeal I am putting you through,
and so strict justice up there is overruled [*duro giudicio là sù frange*].[77]

The "strict justice" (*duro giudicio*) appears to be God's judgment, but it is really the hardness of human hearts, of "all who are without pity" and are inimical to Lucia, the *figura* of enlightening grace. Men and women in their willful, stubborn resistance to grace create a God in their own image and likeness that can be "overruled" only by the gentle obedience of the mother of God, thereby making possible a vision of the love divine, the same vision that opens before Dante's eyes at the climax of *Paradiso* following St. Bernard's prayer to the Virgin. The "strict justice" applies to those spirits who refuse God's merciful mediation after death just as they did in life, who turn from it with their entire being and find refuge in the place of its negation, in hell. This is given visual form in canto III of *Inferno* in the scene where jostling crowds of the dead throng the banks of the Acheron in their eagerness to cross over forever. This exceeds any of the imaginary terrors of hell conceived by later Christianity as a form of judicial punishment: a sinister vision, and not without reason it developed as the mediations of church and empire reached a crisis point and were no longer able to guarantee the objectual salvation of the community and of individuals; Dante, however, still expresses a hope that their power to save might be restored.

This is not the place to set out a history of Christian eschatology, or trace the development of Judaic beliefs about it. And there is even less space here to discover where the idea of life after death came from, though everything would suggest it originated in duplicating the representation of earthly existence that must have stabilized with the invention of the first forms of burial. However, what the historical Jesus may have thought about the subject is relevant in our consideration of Dante, since it enables us to gauge how far his eschatological and Marian developments tie back to the source of the Christian tradition.

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From Middle Judaism Jesus took over the belief in resurrection and the eschatological imagery, which he interpreted to fit in with his proclamation of the Kingdom. As a result, the fertile ambivalence of this central theme of his preaching reacted on the eschatological themes, so that judgment came to correspond to the divine dynamism of God's revelation and mankind's acceptance or refusal. Thus the advent of the Kingdom is already judgment, favorable or unfavorable, with as ample a margin for repentance and recovery

as human life experience can remain open to, and with the final break that brings human life on earth to an end. However, life after death is never precisely defined, and indeed, Jesus is annoyed by any casuistry regarding life beyond the grave, as in the discussion of resurrection reported in the synoptics.

The relevant episode comes after the parable of the murderous vine growers and the trick question about paying tribute to Caesar, with Matthew varying the account slightly by inserting the eschatological parable of the great supper in between. The question about resurrection posed by his adversaries, in this case the Sadducees, designed to trap Jesus, postulates the case of seven brothers who die one after the other, having married the same woman one after the other. The question is which of the seven should be her partner at the resurrection. Jesus's reply in Mark, which is followed word for word in Matthew, starts by criticizing the failure to understand either the sense of the scriptures or God's *dynamis,* "In fact, when they rise from the dead they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like the angels in heaven" (Mk 12:25), and concludes peremptorily that Yahweh is not "the God of the dead but of the living: you are therefore very much mistaken" (12:27). This answer is dense with meaning, and its style is characteristic of Jesus: the angelic condition indicates an existence completely taken up in the divine mediation, and the final phrase defines the God that Jesus had in mind, a God once and for all transcending the chthonic, underworld characterization of the archaic Yahweh: a God of the living, not of the dead, whose only true nature is Life, being one with resurrection. Perhaps this penetrating allusion explains two details in Matthew placed after the eschatological parable of the great supper, which clarifies the type of spiritual marriage Jesus had in mind: the "crowd" (*hoi ochloi*) "astonished at his teaching" (22:33) and the Sadducees reduced to silence (22:34) by the veiled reference to the gloomy remnants of the Temple cult.

The structural connection between resurrection and the God of the living undoubtedly means that resurrection as conceived by Jesus begins in this life, in the acceptance of the Kingdom indicated by the wedding, in the life-enhancing dimension of love. All else is secondary for Jesus, and to attempt to go into details is not only impossible but misleading and embroils us in an absurd logic of definition that has nothing to do with the life-giving *dynamis* of the Kingdom.

Historical Christianity cannot be said to have taken much note of these Jesuan statements; and, besides, the desire for a better understanding of eschatology could only grow as the Parousia of Christ retreated and believers felt the need to depict a next-world destiny that rewarded followers of Christ's teaching and punished those who ignored it. As a result, too much stress was placed on justice in a way typical of the West; while on the one hand it brought out the absolute character of the Christian mediation, but on the other it led to neglecting the developments made in the late Middle Ages, culminating in Dante's immense *machina imaginalis* that is really produced by the choices made by the dead, who appear before the poet in almost diaphanous bodily forms that emanate from the soul (this is not made clear until we are some way into *Purgatorio*[78]) which for all its torments an instant's comprehension of Christ's love would suffice to dissolve, as the visit of Beatrice-Christ to hell proves. That inconceivable event prompts Virgil's question, producing the crypto-Christological answer and the following clarification about mobilizing forces for salvation in heaven, with specific allusions to the divine Trinity taking steps to save Dante-humanity.[79] Virgil is chosen by the Trinity, acting through Mary, Lucia, and the Christic *figura* of Beatrice, and with this pagan culture is chosen to bring salvation to mankind, the implication being that pre- and non-Christian humanity is destined for salvation. The fact that Dante's hell possesses this *imaginalis* character is proven by a detail in canto V of *Inferno.* The turbulent wind of the lustful that whirls Paolo and Francesca around dies down to allow the story of their love to be told, a love authentic and courtly at the outset though culpable in its conclusion: a temporary suspension of sentence that leaves secretly open the possibility of a salvation for them, given that they keep loving each other and are not divided like the other souls.[80] It is no accident that Dante's *Paradiso* gives less emphasis than one might expect to St. Augustine,[81] that is to the Church Father who described mankind as a *massa damnata,* damned through the objective corruption of original sin.

Not surprisingly, the modern world reacted to St. Augustine and such developments, historically and culturally motivated but scarcely recognizing the gospel message, by totally rejecting the imagery of Christian eschatology, with no attempt to assess its imaginal resources, whereas Dante's spiritual thinking restores them to us. And the eschatology of the *Divine Comedy* no

longer looks like an ingenious literary invention, or an isolated high point, if we are able to recognize at its start the intermediatory action of the mother of God made man. Just as Christianity without Mary would remain literally unconceived, that is, it would lack Christ's mediation, so human salvation after death would be inconceivable without her and her mediation-generating conception. Dante's "Gentle Lady" makes God's mercy conceivable and shows us that our salvation or rejection is determined by our response, and that dilemma assumes the existence of the intermediary and intermedial space of purgatory. There is no precise indication as to the degree and duration of penalties since quantitative eternity and the horrific torments of hell, disproportionate to any sin as they are traditionally and mythically imagined, symbolize a qualitative state, an existential condition. Origen sought to save the unconditional nature of divine mercy by conjecturing the apocatastasis, the final redemption of all created beings including the wicked, evidence of his theological daring though never fully worked out. The more remote analogies with the Orphic or Egyptian afterlife cast into relief the humanizing capacity of the Christian vision brought about through Mary and Christ's redemption, where passing over at death becomes transitivity of life, reversibility of salvation returning the *eschaton* to the present moment, to the living dimension of fulfilled eschatology, the real Bataillean *chance* for supreme, fulfilled love. And so the writer whose fame, more than that of any other Christian poet and thinker, rests on a great eschatological fresco that is intended to serve as a warning, presents us with a surprisingly refreshing and sophisticated solution. Building on the more perceptive eschatological ideas of the tradition, it affects the understanding of our experience, which is heavenly, purgatorial, or hellish according to the degree of its objectual realization. Parmenides's formidable ontological idea and its spiritual development in Plato are fulfilled here in a way no longer cosmic and impersonal but entirely historical and human.

Mary is therefore revealed to be an appropriate and nonmythicizing key for interpreting the imagery of Christian eschatology, the pre-Christian cults competing with the cult of Christ in the first centuries of its expansion, and the fertility cult of ancient Judaism celebrated with the hierogamy of Yahweh and sacrifice of the *molk.* Like Christ, when he accepts the *molk* ritual for himself albeit in veiled and vicarious ways that bring out the typical aspect, Mary casts a retrospective light on the history and significance of these cults whose

object to sacrifice and guarantee lay in eroticism and fertility. The mother of Christ as a *typus* is partly superimposed on many other analogous figures, the Yahwistic Asherah primarily with the Greek Persephone in second but by no means secondary place, which only confirms the redemptive power of Christianity vis-à-vis the religious history of mankind. The cults of the mother goddesses (or daughter goddesses, if we think of Persephone) are far removed from the humanity of the events in which Mary is the main but unobtrusive actor, and it is precisely this distance that makes it possible to recover what is objectual in those cults free from the bloody violence at their roots, and to recognize not only the victims that fed them but also the human longing for salvation and protection evident in this crudely ritual origin. In the light of sacrificial mediation, the major theme running through this study, we have every reason to imagine the prehistoric mother goddess as a real queen of death who made it possible for the ancient peoples worshiping her to divert violence away from other mothers, children, and families—a literally hellish necessity, a tragic condition defining human life still without any genuinely objectual transcendence, and corresponding as well to the religious situation of Judaism before its monotheistic spiritualization. And so the Christian tradition that sees Eve as prefiguring Mary allows us to interpret prehistoric and pagan images of the mother goddess holding a child, the Yahwistic Asherah for example, as unconsciously anticipating the image of the mother of God.

This prefiguration was the inspiration behind the apparition of the mother and child that so fascinates the protagonist of *The Magic Mountain* Hans Castorp during his dream on ancient Greece and its sacrificial roots. But Thomas Mann fails to recognize how far his hieratic mother is indebted to the Christian Virgin, and the more profound and simpler significance escapes him; as a consequence, the mother-idol of Castorp's dream remains covertly associated with the witches' Dionysian omophagy of a child which is the climax of his dream. In the world of *Kultur* that Mann dreamt of, there was no Solomon to defend the defenseless child and understand, through wisdom coming from God, which woman was the real mother; and though he might try to understand the conditions in which children might not be torn from their mothers, that in fact is what occurred in the First World War. And yet the answer to Mann's problem lay ready to hand in Goethe's *Faust,* the masterwork of the writer who had always been his literary and spiritual mediator. Originally intended to be a modern tragedy, *Faust* finally

became an unclassifiable epic poem of meditation, with the tragic element transfigured and sublimated in a redemption going beyond all historical and categorial classification. Mann is evidently unaware of the Marian message contained in the final scene of *Faust, Part Two,* and yet in *The Holy Sinner* (*Der Erwählte*—1951), his Christian and neomedieval meditation, though not able to match that message, he comes closer to it.

Among the unresolved revenants of modern European culture is how Germany's greatest poet came to round off his career by so sensationally restoring the mystery of the female Marian mediation, and in terms not simply Christian but primarily Catholic, under the influence of Dante among others. As a young man Goethe had already expressed his admiration for Dante, perfectly accessible to him in Italian;[82] but in any case, I think he found a final mediator toward the spiritual world of the *Divine Comedy* in Manzoni, whose shadow accompanies the works of Goethe's last period, and whose Lucia in *The Betrothed* takes her character from Dante's Lucia but also takes on the transitive functions of Mary and Beatrice. When Lucia in the novel is kidnapped by enemies to prevent her from marrying Renzo, she makes a vow of virginity to Mary. By thus denying herself the married love she had every right to enjoy she makes the supreme objectual renunciation, which is followed by grace intervening for the salvation of her kidnapper, who is literally unnamed: *Innominato.*[83] Lucia is the most eloquent modern illustration of the real meaning of Mary's virginity and is anticipated by another of Manzoni's creations, Ermengarda in *Adelchi* who dies for love after agreeing to give up the man she loves. These female figures must have shed light on the sacrifice made by Gretchen, the girl who falls in love with Faust and at the end of *Faust, Part One* chooses to die rather than be saved by the arts of Mephistopheles. And it is thanks to Gretchen's love that Mary intervenes to save Faust in the final scene of *Part Two,* and so adumbrates the salvation of mankind as a whole, a reprise and commentary on Dante's eschatology. Unexpectedly there is a tribute to Mary in the words of *Doctor Marianus* who symbolizes the wisdom inherent in her, and it is the most explicit and moving Marian tribute in modern literature:

> Supreme Mistress of the world
> let me in the blue
> vaults of heaven

contemplate your mystery!
Accept what moves the human heart,
deeply and tenderly,
and with a holy yearning for love [*heiliger Liebeslust*]
propels it toward you![84]

Attempts have been made to ascribe the enigmatic "eternal Feminine" (*Das Ewig-Weibliche*)[85] at the close of the poem to some anemic natural, cosmic principle, but it is really none other than the saving function of the female Marian mediation.[86] It is the procreative love of woman—not the love of some neutral element—that gives life eternally and makes the saving mercy of God incarnate accessible in this world, propelling man's yearning for love upward and sanctifying it, permanently consigned to its Object. This is the promise fulfilled in the Resurrection and evoked by the penitent girl, "formerly called Gretchen" in her description of Faust's resurrection:

See, how he has torn himself free
from all earthly ties [*Erdenbande*] and his old shape,
and how his youthful self [*Jugendskraft*] bursts
through his ethereal garment [*ätherischen Gewande*]!
Allow me to be his guide:
the new day blinds him still![87]

No other work of modern literature has evoked the Resurrection with such power and splendor, and the reference to the "ethereal garment" clothing Faust's resurrected body, finally freed from all ties in this world, all earthly double binds, is a precise intermedial detail that comes as no surprise from the writer who so skillfully orchestrated the *Elective Affinities*. But it says nothing to commentators fixated on a stereotype of Goethe as a pagan nature worshiper. The possibility that his complete and pertinent reassessment of classical culture led the Protestant Goethe to rediscover Catholicism Thomas Mann was essentially following in the wake of Goethe when he created the vision of Hans Castorp, and the present study intends to do the same but in the cooler climes of philosophical and historical research. Mann, however, torn between a history without *pietas* and a *pietas* without a history, was not to reach the supreme heights attained by his long-standing model,

though he falls not far short. His impasse had resurfaced in our contemporary culture and has proved critical (in both senses of the word); growing misunderstanding has resulted in hermeneutic losses that have made the *historia sacra* in which Mary features increasingly opaque and unrecognizable. Once again, figural exegesis and a defense of the *figura* of the human being show themselves to be in agreement, and their subtle harmony, inaudible to those unprepared for it, takes on an unexpected resonance in these painfully unharmonious times.

With Mary, in the light of what we have learned, we can be said to have reached the innermost nerve center of the Christian mediation, not because she is herself that center but because she takes us to it, not because she represents it but because she presents it, re-presents it, transitively in her son who is the Son of God, and in this lies her significance as *figura* for the church as a whole. The peculiar nature of the Marian mediation is not that it takes the mediatory function on itself but rather that it only points to it, leaving space for it to be conceived, and experienced, and accepting and accommodating its humanity while paying full witness to its divine aspect. This is the exact opposite of the mentality prevailing in our time and explains why the discrete Marian presence has become so pervasive in Christianity today. It is the reason why the mother of Jesus is an apocalyptic figure, not announcing the end of the world but indicating the only means to prevent it, the love with which we must embrace and give meaning to the life of man, and so enable the human world to exist. The Christian *apokalypsis,* the revelation of Christ, is just that; and as a secret of objectual mediation it applies to all religions and cultures since to behave in any other way simply implies the destruction of humanity in both senses of the word, destroying the human and the humans.

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Our journey of discovery within the Christian mediation has turned out to be neither short nor superficial, so that we can take up the comparative question we started from with fuller knowledge of the facts. We have seen how Mary's mediation takes the form of a prolepsis to the mediation of Christ that constitutes its sole center of gravity. Her silent presence in the Crucifixion scene in John helps us to reach the highest point of the Christian mediatory coordinates, the point of convergence and divergence on which

opponents as well as defenders of Christianity both concentrate their efforts. The point I am talking about is the cross of Christ, the real *crux* in both a historical and philological sense. And because of its repercussions on all the themes explored so far it will form the subject of the remaining chapters of my inquiry.

6.

# Crosses Ancient and Modern

## 1. The Origin of Crucifixion

From what we have examined so far, we might already draw significant conclusions about the nature and formation of the Christian mediation and its relationship to Greek and Roman civilization as well as Middle Judaism. But without looking specifically at the major Christian symbol, the cross, we would miss the heart of the matter, the spirit capable of breathing life into a long and complicated history. The cross has a strange symbolic vitality and still today has the power to arouse resistance and rejection, even among those who call themselves Christians but are nevertheless none too happy to be reminded of the real nature of this appallingly painful death. And still today, two thousand years after the event, the cross creates a scandal because that was the aim of it right from the start, and Christians themselves took several generations to accept it as their symbol, not to speak of the representation of the dead or dying Christ. It was only with the Franciscan revolution in the thirteenth century that such images and paintings became customary, incidentally marking the first step toward achieving the representation of human reality, the major innovation in Italian and Western art.[1]

In a word, the cross on which Jesus was crucified is not just a part of

our comparative analysis but its summation and climax, because it offers the starkest, cruelest comparison, the crucifixion by the Romans of a troublesome fanatic who had succeeded in earning the hatred of nearly all the Judaic factions, and so had to be eliminated for the real danger he posed in the most volatile and dangerous province in the whole empire. Pilate was possibly convinced of Christ's innocence in moral and strictly legal terms, but we forget that for any Roman such innocence would only set in greater relief a more grievous fault, a naïve miscalculation of the political impact of his decisions, not to mention his inability to come to terms with the real power relations in Jerusalem and Judea. When such forces are at play, the innocence of the accused only makes matters worse, adding the procedural hurdle of blamelessness that is always a nuisance for the professionally trained judge. And innocence, besides, is a great help to whoever sets out to destroy it, since the innocent are precisely *in-nocens,* in no position to do harm (*nocere*), that is to say, they are powerless to intervene and defend themselves. The ideal victim is always the impotent victim, and innocence is nothing but impotence. So we really cannot but turn our attention to the Romans since, if they did not actually invent this agonizing death, they perfected it, made use of it all over the empire, and became highly proficient at it, as was only to be expected from the masters of the ancient world.

A firsthand testimony of the typical Roman mentality in this regard comes from the reactions of Celsus to Christ's crucifixion, who in his *Alethes logos* (meaning both *On the True Doctrine* and *The True Account*) sneers at the weakness of the crucified Jesus and compares him to Dionysus in the *Bacchae:*

> At least Euripides's Bacchus says: "The god himself will set me free, when I want him to." But in the case of Jesus, not even those who condemned him to death suffered for it; Pentheus, on the other hand, was driven mad or torn to pieces. They made fun of Jesus, dressed him in a purple cloak, crowned him with thorns, and put a rod in his hand![2]

The patriot in Celsus is primarily concerned to save the *res publica* from the new superstition and so he redoubles his attack, emphasizing the Son of God's helplessness with the same satisfaction that the Roman authorities derived during the persecutions as they watched the public torture and

execution of the Christian fanatics who appeared to threaten the stability and majesty of the empire:

> And why doesn't he show some divine sign [*theion*] now at least, if not before, and throw off this ignominy and punish those who insult him and his father? What were his words even as his body was crucified [*anaskolopizomenou*]? . . .
>
> The truth is he never convinced anybody as long as he lived, seeing that he failed to convince even his own disciples and finally suffered in the way he did.[3]

For Celsus, as for every good *civis romanus,* the one true mark of an effective mediation is force, able to make the world accessible by conquest, by dominating and organizing it. It is no accident that against Christ on the cross he can find no better argument, performatively speaking, than the insulting remarks of the onlookers in the synoptics. He puts their words into the mouth of the Jew who appears as his ally in attacking the Christians: "And how could you be him [*viz.* Son of God] when you were not saved by your father, or were unable to save yourself?"[4] In arguing like this against the crucified Jesus, the Roman differs from the crowd at Golgotha only in regard to the theological nuance that for the Romans meant the numerous divine *numina* that protected Rome or, at best, as for Celsus, the single cosmic-metaphysical divinity of Middle Platonism. As a rule, power has always been associated with the divine, starting with the ancient experience of kratophany, and this was never truer than in the case of the ancient empires; without their example, the representation of a single universal god is unlikely to have taken hold; and today, when few believe in the power of the divine, it is the divinity of power that prevails, in the most sordid forms as permitted by modern demythologization.

Celsus is so scornful of the slave's death (the so-called *servile supplicium*) inflicted on the ridiculous founder of the new superstition that he does not even bother to look for further parallels to show there is nothing unique about a symbol he finds so deeply ignominious. And yet, if he had done so, he would have discovered something of possible interest to him. Among the mythic material concerning the enemies of Dionysus, Diodorus Siculus records a tradition that Lycurgus was subjected to atrocious torture and then

crucified.[5] The relevant passage in Diodorus, together with other testimony, has been adduced by Robert Eisler to interpret a seal (probably from the third century) bearing the image of a crucified man and inscribed *Orpheos Bakkikos,*[6] as evidence for a tradition of a crucified Orpheus religiously valid for the Christians, too.[7] The thesis is controversial and without further support. More recently the carved image has been explained as deriving from the Roman use of a funerary wax effigy to represent the death and rebirth of Julius Caesar or an emperor, an iconography later copied by Christian art.[8] In that case we would have a kind of phenotypic juxtaposition of a Roman funerary symbol connected to the violent death of Caesar and many other emperors, with the Christian symbol par excellence, while Eisler's conjecture aims at denying the originality of the religious meaning assigned to Christ's crucifixion. At any rate, these comparative arguments, if they had some validity, might either scale back or refute the apologist Justin Martyr, the main target of Celsus's polemic, who states quite flatly, referring to the demons willing to do anything in order to damage Christ's revelation:

> But nowhere and for not one of the so-called sons of Zeus did they copy the idea of crucifixion [*staurothenai*]; in fact, they could not understand it, since everything said about it was expressed symbolically [*symbolikos*], as we have shown.[9]

Just before this passage, Justin had set out a theory that the demons imitated Christ out of envy and were ready to ape and fake events relating to him and prophecies about him in order to confuse mankind;[10] now he puts it in a more perspicuous way, seeing that the devils, faced with the cross, demonstrate all their cognitive limitations. They cannot understand the universal symbolism of the cross that Justin shows to be ubiquitous: in ships' masts, in plowing (fields were plowed crisscross in antiquity), in the human figure with arms outstretched sideways, and in the pagans' own banners. A constant theme in Christian apologetics, it reappears in modern times in John Donne's hymn *The Cross,* in response to its suppression as a symbol in Anglican England because it was considered to be too papist. In this way Justin makes a cosmic symbol of the cross, starting with its uniqueness, and this is in line with his doctrine of Christ as the divine *Logos* incarnate, enabling all the signs accessible to the human *logos* to be traced back to God:[11] consequently,

the cross acquires its extraordinary significance not because crucifixion was a terrible way to die but because the man crucified was the incarnate *Logos.* From the mediatory viewpoint this statement is correct, since what gives the cross its revelatory meaning is the divine mediation made recognizable in Jesus Christ, but it fails to represent the element of transitive reversibility through which visibility is given in Christ's crucifixion not only to all those tortured and killed throughout history but to all who suffer, that is, to all human beings and ultimately to all creation, according to Paul in Romans 8:22. Justin's argument strives to fix once and for all the salient, unmistakable difference of Christ's crucifixion but his effort to define it remains vulnerable to the argument of its similarity to *mythos* and the corresponding event (according to the unified method of myth and ritual that includes also the symbolic and *imaginalis* aspects), whenever an analogous myth/symbol/event is found to be analogous with a sacralized or divine figure, hung from a cross.

Needless to say, modern research has been directed toward finding factual confirmation or disproof without realizing that the very notion of fact, of *factum,* had undergone radical change since the days of Justin Martyr and Celsus; and it is almost needless to add that in regard to the Crucifixion the difference remains *sub iudice.* In fact, coming back to Diodorus's testimony, in the Greek world before the Christian era the verb he uses to describe the punishment inflicted on Lycurgus (*anastaurizo*) indicated execution against a stake, not crucifixion properly speaking.[12] However, since Diodorus wrote in the first century AD during the period of Roman dominion, it is quite possible for his meaning to include the Roman form of execution (on the other hand, Celsus describing Christ's crucifixion one century later uses the verb *anaskolopizo* which in itself meant impaling). But, to return to the intriguing image of *Orpheos Bakkikos,* leaving aside the thorny question of its precise explanation and the more normalizing hypothesis that it is the result of a Christian influence, it points up the need to rid the question of the ambivalences with which it is beset as a result of our having passed unawares from the performative terms of antiquity to the empiricism of modern scientific observation.

Justin was not wrong to claim mediatory and redemptive uniqueness for the cross of Christ, except that it does not take a conflictual and intransitive form, as he thought, but emerges in the objectual and human significance

the cross acquires with Christ, and appears most clearly when superimposed on a long and varied series of tortures to which the Roman crucifixion can be approximated without difficulty.[13] Evidence for these comes from the numerous arboreal forms of execution recorded by Frazer, with the victim hung from a tree and subjected to various tortures until finally suffocated or quartered, subsequently becoming identified with the plant itself, like Marsyas-Attis with the pine tree.[14] This process takes us back to the origins of Dionysus *dendrites* and the passage in the *Bacchae* describing Pentheus chased up a fir tree by the bacchantes. At Rome, traitors were bound to a tree consecrated to the gods of the underworld and flogged to death;[15] this *arbor infelix* is a possible intermediate step between arboreal sacrifice and the capital punishment of crucifixion. And so, in relation to the Orphic-bacchic seal, if the Roman funeral reading were correct, we could better realize its symbolic background that in any case goes very close to the same religious-juridical area from which the judicial torture derived, whereas, in case the conjecture of a Christian influence on an Orphic cultic image had some truth, it would not be so strange if the Christian crucifixion was interpreted as religiously appropriate for Orpheus himself on the basis of the undeniable analogy between Christ's fate and his own. As a matter of fact, the comparative question of precedence is overshadowed as soon as we ascertain that the analogy works in both directions. And Diodorus's information also gains in interest in the same way, quite apart from the precise meaning of the verb he uses, since all the variants of sacrifice and capital punishment carried out on trees or wooden structures help to contextualize the semantic shifts in the Greek verbs concerned. In any case, there is no call for erudite research in order to find parallels and precedents for the cross of Christ, for as soon as we look a little further afield the similarities and convergences come flooding in (we might remember, in the Sumerian myth of Inanna's descent into the underworld, the "peg" or gibbet on which her corpse was hung[16]) and generally have the cosmic significance the Christian apologists were thinking of, whereas the crucifixion of Christ bears silent witness to its sacrificial origin.

As a symbol the cross is found in cultures worldwide—in Africa, Asia, and America—and must be considered a figure of great antiquity. In ancient Egypt, for example, the *ankh* or handled cross represented life, and during the solar henotheism (which was, rather, henolatry with a henotheistic tendency) of the pharaoh Akhenaton, it represented the sun god Aton and was

subsequently taken up by Coptic Christianity. Often the cross had a cosmological and distributive function, indicating the four quarters of the world and the cardinal points, while a variant, documented especially in China, has a fifth direction corresponding to the head. A relationship between these cosmic and sacral cross-shapes and the cross of physical punishment fits in perfectly with the trend of our overall thesis that mediations have a sacrificial origin of mediations, and once again widens the question to embrace man's entire religious dimension. What then is specific to the cross of Christ? From what we have learned in the preceding chapters we could already give an answer, but the point of the question is really to oblige us to make a closer historical examination of the cross and its possible origin.

Why exactly has the Christian symbol always held such universal fascination, still continuing to provoke scandalized reactions and rejection? A perfectly valid theological explanation is possible: the cross is no more and no less than the sign of the Passion. But once again we come up against the need to find a valid answer to the comparatist argument since, if none is forthcoming, we will forgo recognizing the semantic richness of the Christian cross and see in it no significance beyond its being the instrument by which the Son of God was executed. It is like saying the cross only became significant because the Son of God died there, without the mediatory assumptions that not only lent theological weight of a different order to Justin's reflections but gave his doctrine of the *Logos* a content different from the Stoic doctrine of the universal *logos*. If the "occasionalist" reading were correct, we could not explain the universal value taken on by the symbol, whereby people in every age and culture have been able to understand it, whether to take it up or reject it. Indeed, such a reading ends up losing all its authentically Christian character and converges with the arguments of Christianity's opponents, such as Celsus who saw the cross as a form of capital punishment on a par with many others but less significant since it was more humiliating and unworthy of free men—"did not many others also suffer agonizing deaths and no less ignobly?"[17]—with the further difference that modern trivializing destroys an acquisition that is at least moral, which Celsus, still participating fully in the imperial Roman mediation, had not yet reached; and thus the trivializations show themselves for what they are, trifles pure and simple that are a bar to understanding how the cross in Christianity can represent the human destiny of suffering and death together with the hope for redemption from it. If we

are unable to explain the specificity and universality of the cross, Christianity itself as a historical and religious phenomenon becomes incomprehensible. More than ever, we need to understand the inherent power of the symbol to sum up all that Jesus said and did, just as, faced with the comparatist arguments, the need remains to explain the pervasive presence of the cross in all the world's cultures.

And once again, a careful survey of the ancient world in which Christianity developed and spread—this inexhaustible source of religious and historical insight that we try to escape from, and oppose or flatten in our superficial way—will enable us to approach the question correctly, so that we will avoid the dangers of our rather obscure formalism and understand better the wealth and implications of traditional Christian interpretations. Since the formal visible structure of crucifixion is explainable in consistent and concrete terms, it will be our starting point for a brief journey of reflection on the infinite crosses that mark the history of man.

For my explanation nothing fits so well as the *Bacchae*, our paradigm for exploring sacrifice in Greece, specifically to the scene of the collective killing of Pentheus on Mount Cithaeron presented indirectly, in the Greek manner, in a messenger's speech. His *sparagmos* begins when Agave grabs his arm and tears off his shoulder. The text adds that Ino does the same on the other side:

> <Agave> seizes the left arm
> and, pulling hard against the wretched man's side,
> tears off [*apesparaxen*] his shoulder [*omon*], not by her own strength
> but through the dexterity [*eumareian*] the god imbued her hands with.
> And Ino finishes the job on the other side,
> cuts up his flesh; Autonoë and the whole crowd [*ochlos*]
> of bacchantes throw themselves on him.[18]

Even at this moment of greatest horror Euripides does not dispense with a stylized process, breaking up and rolling out the action almost in slow motion. Agave's action comes first, immediately answered by Ino on the other side of Pentheus. The evident order of events creates an emphasis corresponding well to the heightened importance that every gesture and every

moment assumes in such situations. At the same time, it recalls the initial moment of ritualized lynching, when the collective frenzy reached a climax and there could be a kind of suspension due to the mediatory power attributed to the victim, lasting until someone attacked and the fury of the crowd was unleashed. In this ritual context, however, this should not be thought of as a blind onrush, as of a pack of wild animals; it was extremely precise and concentrated, the result of the collective ecstatic perception being focused on a single object, on one *obiectum.* This ecstatic concentrated fury is the god that instills in every hand the necessary "dexterity" (εὐμάρεια), in the sense of deftness of hand, a particular knack—the word derives from μάρη, a poetical term for the hand possibly connected to *meros,* the sacrificial part—associating manual skill and ritual ferocity in a way difficult for modern readers to grasp, but essential and central to the sacrificial machine it alone can set in motion. Something of the sort occurred in the Sinai camel sacrifice, when the first wound inflicted by the tribal chief was the signal for dismemberment to begin; there the dexterity consisted in choosing the right moment, the *kairos,* the climactic moment of collective arousal when the group's ecstatic attention was at a peak. It is interesting to reconstruct how Euripides sets about making repulsive and contrary to classical decorum a scene that in itself is both representable and easy to perceive, and he achieves it precisely through his theatrical stylization and careful attention to ritual.

The frenzied role-switching that led to the catastrophe on Cithaeron continues, stringing together in rapid succession the subjective viewpoints of the various actors and spectators of the drama. First, Euripides gives us Pentheus's harrowing speech, admitting his own guilt in an attempt to bring his mother to her senses; for the last time he regains a lucid mind, but it is too late to change his fate (ll. 1118–21). After that, the messenger's narration of Pentheus's massacre brings together the subjective viewpoint of the lynchers with the narrator's own viewpoint; the lynchers feel they are moved by the god and have an altered perception of time, no different from their terrified victim, whereas the messenger as an onlooker observes events in the most realistic terms as a lynching performed at terrific speed, no less terrifying than the thing itself. The tragedy maintains the manner of performance and interpretation of myth and ritual, but it takes the agony to such an extreme as to suggest the original course of events, which is not hard to establish and will enable us to pass immediately to the form of execution we are concerned with.

Agave and Ino must be imagined to have acted at great speed, but also simultaneously. The text tells us as much if we just unite the symmetrical gesture of the two women to the divine dexterity instilled in their hands by the whole raging mob; hands are given line-end emphasis more than once by way of comment on the *eumareia,* the special knack that triggers off the slaughter. Euripides's superb stylization suggests the basic scheme for this type of situation: the victim is held fast and torn apart by his lynchers pulling on either side; we must imagine the same position would have resulted if the two mothers in the Judgment of Solomon had decided to split the child between them, as effectively occurs when the two crones eat a child raw in *The Magic Mountain*. With intuitive clarity we see the origin of the cross emerging from the most archaic forms of sacrifice. The Roman cross of crucifixion is nothing but a symbolic development of the action of dismembering the victim in the four directions represented by his limbs; moreover, if we add the fifth direction of the head, as found in Chinese spatial symbolism, we obtain an anthropomorphic figure, and this is the plastic, performative scheme of a human being undergoing the most savage and powerful of ritual treatments. On account of its central position and importance, however, the head often develops as an independent symbol, which calls for some further remarks since it takes us back to the great civilization that gave worldwide fame to this capital punishment.

The cross reserved to the slave could have deep roots in the very symbolic center of Roman power and takes us back to the deep reasons for the possible overlap between the Christian symbol and the cross of *Orpheos Bakkikos* interpreted as a cultic image of the dead emperors. Particularly important in the Eternal City defining itself as *caput mundi* was the sacrificial and foundational theme of the *caput,* the divine head that gives its name to the *Capitolium,* the most sacred place in ancient Rome together with the *Palatinus.* Livy records how excavation of temple foundations on the Capitoline Hill in the time of Tarquinius Superbus turned up a *caput,* a skull with the face still intact, a presage of the city's eternal dominion (I, 55). The symbolism of *Capitolium* had a cosmic correspondence in the rotation of the heavens, with the *caput* corresponding to the north pole, while another correspondence could be found in the raised arms of the augur or priest to the directions east and west. If transposed from the vertical to the horizontal plane, this scheme is still recognizable, no doubt with variations and practical adaptations, in

the plan of Roman fields and colonies, laid out around the axes of the *cardo* (the *axis mundi,* often identified as a tree[19]) and the *decumanus.* The explanation is speculative, of course, and evidence is scant, but this time, rather than piling up clues and erudite quotations, I want to turn to the great witness of William Shakespeare, and more precisely to a climactic moment in his *Julius Caesar,* the drama representing the historical events to which the seal with the script *Orpheos Bakkikos* might be indirectly linked.

The passage I am referring to occurs just before Caesar's murder. Apparently gripped by a fit of megalomania, he exalts his own greatness in exaggerated terms while he is regally receiving the conspirators pretending to be humble petitioners. With superb insight, Shakespeare sets the scene at the center of the symbolical coordinates of Rome's foundation, on the Capitoline Hill, as all the characters persist in reminding us, where the ominous signs taken from Plutarch and foretelling Caesar's death come to be concentrated. Caesar feels himself to be one and the same with the sacred coordinates of the *Capitolium:*

> But I am constant as the northern star,
> Of whose true fix'd and resting quality
> There is no fellow in the firmament.
> The skies are painted with unnumber'd sparks,
> They are all fire and every one doth shine,
> But there's but one in all doth hold his place:
> So, in the world; 'tis furnish'd well with men,
> And men are flesh and blood, and apprehensive;
> Yet in the number I do know but one
> That unassailable holds on his rank,
> Unshak'd of motion: and that I am he.[20]

This is much more than "a strange fit of exaltation" or a spectacular hyperbole;[21] it is the theatrical and dramatic demonstration of the Aristotelian Unmoved Mover, "unshak'd of motion" and for that very reason the only being authorized to say "I am," with an utterance this time in debt to the biblical God. This human/divine "northern star" appears as supremely detached from the sublunar world "furnish'd well with men" made of "flesh and blood, and apprehensive," but actually Caesar describes in three words

the whole tragic plot on the verge to make him "constant," "fix'd," "unassailable": the men "apprehensive," in the double sense of being fearful and capable of knowledge, are going to create their divine star, their *caput mundi,* with the "flesh and blood" they are made of. On the Capitoline Hill, where the senate was to crown Caesar king and where clouds had been seen to drizzle blood, as Calpurnia tells him, the ritual slaughter can now take its course, opportunely prepared for by the self-divinizing delirium of its victim, never so much a man apart as at this moment. When he refuses the request of his pretending petitioners, Caesar repeats Pentheus's delirium: "Wilt thou lift up Olympus!" a memorable phrase that recalls and amplifies Pentheus's words about Cithaeron ("Shall we take levers? Or will I have to raise Cithaeron with my own hands, / putting my shoulders or arms under the peaks?"),[22] underlining the ritual function that the Capitoline Hill is about to reassume. Immediately after this, one of the conspirators, Casca, completes the identification of the king-victim with the *axis mundi* and brings his *hands* into play, becoming—so to speak—the living *decumanus* of a still human, too human northern star: "Speak, hands, for me!" With a pertinence that can only be defined as scientific, the collective killing of Shakespeare's Caesar reproduces the core structure of the supreme Roman mediation, the same as that of crucifixion. We can draw the conclusion, therefore, that the conjectural overlap in the Orphic-bacchic seal of the cultic wax symbol of Caesar's corpse with Christ's cross is not so phenotypic as it appeared, because it reproduces the sacrificial origin of the *servile supplicium,* which could be the *supplicium* of emperors as well.

These correspondences go back to very ancient symbolism, taken up in turn and brought together by the Christian cross; we need only think of how the Golgotha motif was developed in the Christian tradition, the place of the skull becoming the skull of the first man, Adam, buried at the foot of the cross and redeemed by its blood.[23] What is relevant for my inquiry now, however, is the dynamic, performative significance of the cross, which leads us at once to its human and sacrificial content. That content is recognizable in certain forms of execution that reproduce, photograph as it were, the victim's immobilized position, and take us up to the threshold of the present era. The pattern seen with Pentheus becomes more obvious, prompting new historical comparisons that bring us up to the present day.

## 2. The Dismemberment of Damiens

Pentheus's immobilized position is repeatedly and gruesomely evident in countless ancient and modern executions involving dismemberment or quartering, such as the execution as late as 1757 of Robert-François Damiens, the would-be assassin of Louis XV, who was first tortured in various ways and then torn apart by horses pulling in opposite directions. These comparisons reveal a further aspect of the crucifixion of Lycurgus: they expose its real structure since, in the best-known version of the myth, Lycurgus, king of Thrace and alter ego of Pentheus, dies in the same way as Damiens, torn apart by four horses. The image of crucifixion becomes still clearer, and the executions also have a revealing detail in common: the use of four horses. The fact that these two dismemberments took place thousands of years apart implies that the same procedure could be both conceived and immediately understood at very different times in history; and to explain this as merely a quest for spectacular forms of torture, as Michel Foucault does, is not sufficient, although to his credit he quotes the episode in full from a contemporary chronicle. The spectacle was no doubt part of the business but in a much more comparative fashion than Foucault supposed, with traditions and changes in mentality coming from the remote past and taking us to the dreadful innovations of modernity.

A direct precedent for Damiens's punishment exists in the sentence carried out in 1610 on François Ravaillac, the assassin of Henry IV.[24] Since his crime threatened the very existence of the mediation of the French monarchy, reestablished after the tremendous strife of the wars of religion, the intention was to make his punishment as severe and exemplary as possible, but the cruelty and suffering devised by the French judges merely combined tortures that were fairly commonplace in the seventeenth century and a matter of course in the centuries before. But Damiens's execution resurrects Ravaillac's at a distance in time of almost 150 years, at the height of the Enlightenment and in Paris, the cultural capital of Europe, and that is what makes the difference. It appears quite extraordinarily archaic, both in the way it was performed and in the reactions it aroused, and yields a rich harvest of information about the cultural changes that had taken place in the meantime. Although it is not at all easy to analyze an event of this kind in detail, the difficulty itself can yield the most valuable result from the cognitive, moral, and artistic

viewpoint, namely the knowledge that attains to the threshold of objectual comprehension, the same knowledge and compassion that moved Manzoni to write what is perhaps the most devastating analysis of judicial proceedings in modern literature. His *Storia della colonna infame* (*History of the Column of Infamy*) is an account, included as an appendix and secret conclusion to *The Betrothed*, of the trial of Guglielmo Piazza and Gian Giacomo Mora, two unlucky wretches accused of being *untori* ("smearers") responsible for spreading the plague in Milan.

For a start, we should not neglect the technical connotations of Damiens's punishment. Horses and executioners in the highly civilized eighteenth century, unlike their predecessors a century before, were not trained for such brutal purposes, and in the end two extra horses had to be brought in, with the executioners assisting the animals with some crude butchery. If we extend the comparison to the ancient Greek equivalent, they become even more impressive. Besides Euripides's story of Hippolytus, whose very name means "torn apart by horses," we have the case of Lycurgus and his equine dismemberment, recorded in his standard myth, with a clear implication of proper training and regular repetition, in other words *eumareia,* the knack that no longer existed in 1757. There was spectacle then, as Foucault rightly insists, but its roots were far more archaic and reached down deeper into the tissues of human culture and behavior than his archaeological and antihistoricist vision could admit. Damiens's dismemberment, preceding the French Revolution by thirty years and tragic almost beyond disbelief, is an example of those accidental experiments that history offers us if we know how to inquire into it, in this case quite literally an experiment in human vivisection.

Though the horror of the spectacle left Voltaire unmoved, since he frowned on the supposed religious fanaticism behind the attack (describing the poor Damiens as a *miserable* and a man close to insanity),[25] it prompted research into more humane techniques of execution resulting, some years later, with supreme unconscious irony in the exemplary, highly civilized, and highly rational guillotine. The humanitarians promoting its use did not realize that the guillotine applies the same principle of dismemberment, but in a less macabre fashion and to the offender's head alone, as in the traditional death sentence of decapitation but without the margin of error, and horror, entailed in an artisanal process entrusted to the steady or unsteady hands of

the executioner. If it were not so depressing, it would be amusing to note that the eighteenth-century theorists, no less than more recent historians, overlooked the fact that the mechanical rationality of the procedure only simplifies and increases the horror of the result. While it made the operation technically infallible and controlled, it tended to eliminate the element of participation, possibly the condemned man's last form of human and social recognition, of almost sacramental dialogue secured through his own body. I say "tended to" because the revolutionary guillotine was still surrounded by the pomp and circumstance of executions in antiquity, but before long the luster wore off in the serial repetition that is the principal characteristic of modern massacres, where more extensive or sanitized methods are employed. On the one hand we have the battlefields of technological warfare, on the other executions carried out in secret and in laboratories, with the death camps of the twentieth-century totalitarian regimes, in a certain sense, the point where the two meet and join.

Before we come to the illuminating achievements of mass violence closer to our own day, we ought to mention that the bloody and spectacular methods applied to Damiens were used again on the successor to Damiens's intended victim, Louis XVI, their technique simplified by enlightenment *clarté.* They had made possible a hidden reversibility, a fossil layer that was ready to reactivate and resurface when revolutionary convulsions seized France and Europe. The inference to be drawn from this is that Damiens was torn to pieces not simply as the king's enemy but also as his potential substitute: the antiking who in ancient times was simply the king whose sacral power had ceased to function. In Lycurgus the two roles still will coincide; in Louis XVI they coincided again, disguised as the enlightenment ideology and political rationalizations brutally rejected de facto by the mob during the execution of 1793, crowding round the scaffold to bathe magically in the consecrated blood of its decapitated, symbolically dismembered, monarch.[26] Modern massacres had still to reach their purest formulation, needing not only mediatory despair at saturation point but also a bureaucratic and industrial machine organized to meet their ambitious goals. In the eighteenth century everything still bore the imprint of the traditions and mentality of the ancien régime, and thus remained differently visible and instructive, didactic and spectacular. But what happened in 1757 was not all anthropological survival or ominous prophecy. There was also a sort of suspension, a no-man's-land in which a perception

grew that was never really eradicated, despite being largely discredited and minimized by in the attempt of subsequent history to suppress it.

Foucault maintains a strict silence about certain aspects of Damiens's dismemberment so as not to destroy his own argument, which is based on an intransitive archaeologism that puts an a priori ban on any illusory, obscuring participation with a view to erasing the human element or what remains of it once and for all.[27] And yet these aspects, passed over in silence, are the most essential. Compared to Lycurgus's death, the one minimal but decisive difference is the presence of the Christian mediation alongside the violence of institutions and the violence of a society that anonymously identifies with it. Though few apply it and bear testimony to it, the Christian mediation is decisive precisely on account of its spontaneous, indefinable character: the harder it is to grasp the more difficult to erase. The following account begins when the horses start pulling Damiens apart, after his flesh has been torn off piecemeal with pincers and boiling oil poured into the wounds. This all takes place in a square in Paris, in the presence of the judicial authorities and the usual public. Many court personages are also present while the king was absent like a sort of *deus otiosus,* in fact the most slothful and lustful of kings, but this time also the most scared in spite of how little the injury he suffered,[28] as if he foresaw the transitive, premonitory character of the agony inflicted upon the failed regicide.

> Sieur Le Breton, the chancellor, approached the patient [*patient*] several times to ask him if he had anything to say. He said no and, needless to say, howled like the damned are said to do at every torment: "Forgive me, my God! Forgive me, Lord." In spite of all the aforementioned tortures, he lifted up his head from time to time and had the courage to look at himself [*se regardait hardiment*]. The ropes held taut by the men pulling at their ends caused him unspeakable suffering. The Sieur Le Breton approached him again and asked if he did not want to say something; he said no. The confessors approached several times and spoke with him at length; he gladly [*de bon gré*] kissed the crucifix they held out to him, reaching out with his lips and saying all the time: "Forgive me, Lord."[29]

If we are sufficiently perceptive, our attention is drawn to three elements in this scene that enable us to grasp the fragile, vital thread of the argument,

not in order to mitigate the horror but to set it apart and discern some light of objectual knowledge there, closely linked to the feeling that goes with it but not reducible to it, since it is the cause and not the consequence of the feeling.

The first element is the language and consists in repeatedly asking the condemned man if he has anything to say, that is, anything translatable into judicial language, the language that has condemned him to this agonizing death. The answer is no, not because Damiens has nothing to say but because what he has to say can no longer be said to the human mediations that decided on making his death exemplary and sentenced him to die by dismemberment. A space opens up, literally and functionally transcendent as compared to the human immanence of death and destruction (which also included family members and their official records: the condemned man's relatives were to be exiled and their accursed surname erased in accordance with the ancient usages of collective responsibility and the *damnatio memoriae*[30]). This means, on a purely phenomenological level without presuming any established religious truths, that what the condemned man had to say could only be said to a transcendent Mediator without any correspondences in this world and to those touched by his Mediation. The forgiveness that the condemned man asks of God is not in itself to be understood by men, as the chronicler's "needless to say" goes to show, expressing the detachment of someone who unfeelingly devalues words evidently dictated by pain and terror. Anyway, what could Damiens have said to those people without them distorting his words and making them meaningless? For the condemned man, or in ancient times the sacrificial victim, the destruction of the body was always accompanied by the destruction of his language, of his chance to be heard. Thus the double bind of hostile representations surrounding Damiens, making communication with others impossible, corresponds to the ropes that bind him fast and tear him to pieces. His only possible communication is sacrificial à la Bataille, assuming that the person communicating and communicated in that way stakes everything once and for all.

The second element to note is the unclassifiable courage of Damiens in wanting to look at his own tortured body, the final confirmation of the courage with which he had borne the long tortures inflicted on him but also something more than the psychological aspect of courage that struck his contemporaries. It seems as if he cannot bear to miss anything of what they

are doing to him. This behavior is a reflex mechanism that makes Damiens seek to share the spectacle with the onlookers: for his identity it marks a last frontier, a final desperate effort to remain within the human society that has condemned him, to keep his "I" even as it is being destroyed within an "us," whatever the cost and no matter how briefly. But this urge toward human and social communication *in extremis*, which assumes its end is near, is turned around and becomes a communication *in corpore vivo* through what life is left in his tortured body. There is nothing psychological or sociological about these observations, not because there are no psychological or social aspects but because an extreme situation has been created that unexpectedly reveals the hidden cost, the limit of definition and destruction. The flesh and blood of every human mediation become visible as in a terrible surgical operation that adds immeasurable cognitive value to the condemned man's autoptic look at himself. The chronicler calls it courage, which is easier to understand, prouder, and more compatible with the delinquent connotations of a would-be assassin and can, in any case, become courage of a different type. In fact, apart from any confused or unpredictably clear ideas poor Damiens might form for himself, his courage without hope becomes the courage of the witness, which is what "martyr" means in Greek. Damiens witnesses with his own body, and on his own body, what they do to him and what he and other people can see of his body. He is their martyr and his own.

The third element to note is the presence of the confessors. To our eyes it appears a matter of ritual, but it reflects a softening of attitudes compared to the Middle Ages and early modern times, when it was usual to deny the last sacraments to the condemned man on the scaffold, thus adding the second death of eternal damnation to capital punishment in this world. The custom was more commonly practiced outside Italy,[31] which says a good deal about the tenor of the Christian faith in much of the West, and in Damiens's trial the religious assistance was still a matter of strong heated discussion.[32] The weakening of the objective aspects of a Christian mediation already in itself problematic was a prelude to its decline as a guiding force in Europe, but objectual openings became increasingly visible, making the no-man's-land in which Damiens's dismemberment takes place even more revealing, suspended between ancient savagery and a sensibility still lacking a name, awaiting the future collective upheavals that would supply it. The moment of suspension

between the ancien régime and its imminent collapse brings out the fact that there was a different presence alongside the enormous suffering inflicted by man on man, the presence of a mediation of another tenor referring to an objectuality that begins where all human objectual reality ends, a mediation represented and made effectively present, re-presented, by the crucifix brought by the confessors and kissed by Damiens. This crucifix, represented and mysteriously re-presenting, is the almost invisible pivotal point around which the whole scene turns, the center joining the abstract coordinates our habits of mind distinguish and oppose to one another. Transcendence and immanence, noumenon and phenomenon, everything now comes together in a single experience, fully visible to anyone wanting to see it and at the same time invisible to whoever does not, an experience that justifies the normal oppositions and makes them a human act, to be understood as a measurable blindness, an ignorance that shows up its own failing.

The ritual object, the crucifix, assigned its simple communicative, symbolic function, acquires unclassifiable life. Its value and significance are not given by the confessors: to the contrary the crucifix itself justifies and gives meaning to their presence. What occurs is a performative, de facto comparison: a comparison of Christ's witness and Damiens's, Christ's body and Damiens's, that restores to Damiens the objectual value that all those around him want to take from him; in actual fact, they have already taken it from him, treating him like an animal for slaughter, like a monstrous aggregate of flesh to be taken apart in order to annihilate its monstrousness (like the body of the Minotaur in Euripides's *Cretans*, an abnormal combination of limbs that had to be disassembled for normality to return, recomposing the social body of Crete[33]). The strangely real symbol of the crucified Christ shows that this world compared to the Greek world is more complex and diverse, and also more unresolved and suspended, envisaging a mediation that transcends violence *alongside* the usual mediations that inflict violence in the most atrocious ways; and yet this being alongside starts off *another* transitivity, an objectual recognition that invisibly affects the destruction of the human object by silently identifying with it. The sign of this identification is the kiss, to which I shall return.

Belief in the monarchic mediation was in fact waning all the time, and deep down, it labored under a guilty conscience inseparable from its technical ineptitude. The dismemberment that was inflicted to confirm that

mediation showed no sign of coming to an end; even with the addition of two horses the executioners were still unsuccessful.

> In the end Samson the executioner went to tell Sieur Le Breton that there was no way [*moyen*], and no hope of finding one, to see the business through and told him to ask their Lordships if they wanted him to have Damiens cut to pieces [*en morceaux*]. Sieur Le Breton, come back from town, ordered them to renew their efforts, which they did; but the horses shied and one of those tied to Damiens's legs slipped on the cobblestones and fell. The confessors returned and spoke to him again. He said (I myself heard him): "Kiss me, Lords [*Baisez-moi, Messieurs*]." The curate of St. Paul's not daring to do so, Sieur de Marsilly passed under the rope tied to Damiens's left arm and kissed him on the forehead. The executioners gathered round and Damiens told them not to swear and curse but to do their job, and said he had nothing against them. He begged them to pray [*les priait de prier*] to God for him and urged the curate of St. Paul's to pray for him at the first mass.[34]

This to us quite incredible sequence has to be seen in its historical and mediatory context, that is, in the indefinable zone of suspension created by the weakening of the collective mediations originating in medieval Europe—in this instance the mediation of the centralized French monarchy. Though modern in its absolutism, its underlying social organization was still feudal and blocked the reforms begun by Louis XIV; the consequent mounting social tension, already high during the irresponsible reign of Louis XV, eventually led to the conflagration of 1789. The power of public mediations might justify any torture or death that resulted in ratifying it; on the other hand, however, where their collective orientation was absent, such extreme measures would appear incomprehensible and unacceptable. Now an in-between state had been reached where past mediations still existed but were not powerful enough to make torture and executions appear to be a matter of divine or natural law; and so, in service of a feckless hope, they were made still more severe so as to stabilize the mediations they stemmed from. As a consequence, however, they substantially confuted those mediations since divine and natural laws act of themselves and need no artificial reinforcement. In this typical phase of public and social crisis people cling to the rules,

perceived as the only and ultimate endorsement of institutions that appear less and less credible; but the rules grow in number and severity, which only exacerbates the lack of an objectual motivation for their existence. The consequent lack of mediatory authorization, and therefore of decision, makes the death throes of the ill-fated Damiens even more agonizing. The executioner sought the chancellor's authority to make a series of cuts in the arm and leg ligaments to facilitate dismemberment, but the chancellor would not make the decision. Right to the end the authorities attempted to hide behind the objectivity and ritual aspects of the punishment, but the only result of their indecision was to prolong and accentuate the horror. The "happy knack," the *eumareia,* to make this kind of execution fast and efficient in performance no longer existed.

Girard's category of persecution texts is useful heuristically, though it can only explain a part of what is happening. It is true these are major historic changes, and the changes in collective mentality brought about by Christianity are an essential element. It is equally true that the old persecutory parameters have become weaker and weaker in modern times, which makes them less and less credible, opening the way for a more compassionate religious behavior, closer to the original Christian message. The seventeenth century saw a final resurgence in witchcraft trials but also the first open criticism of them, although a more cautious criticism, inspired by the Gospels, had already begun during the Renaissance.[35] However, things are really more complicated and retroactive than they appear: the surge in witch hunts marked the final intensification of the traditional struggle against magic, all the fiercer for being less convinced and less convincing, but as a result of that struggle the scientific revolution was made possible. For both the witch hunts and the modern scientific mentality are two moments of one and the same process that saw the old religious and magical paradigms losing ground until they were replaced by a new rational mediation, that of modern science. We must not forget that we are in the period of the wars of religion and of the absolute monarchy seen as the only remedy to theological conflicts that were becoming more and more ideological. Therefore, the constant polemic of the Enlightenment against magic and superstition did not limit itself to be a "new light" of knowledge and progress since it expressed at the same time the need to find a safe self-definition with respect to its immediate antecedents, the religious—and still magical—fight against a more archaic

magic. Each step, once it has achieved its historical function, appears to be a caricature of what it once was, still belatedly clinging to rearguard positions when a new mediation has become established. In the eighteenth century the persecutory forms typical of the ancien régime and perpetrated for religious and political motives that had since lost all power to persuade came under attack from rationalism, secure in the borrowed robes of enlightened despotism but destined in its turn soon to be overwhelmed by the huge wave of revolutionary ideology of which it was in fact the embryo: Voltaire, for example, conducted a campaign in defense of the innocence of Jean Calas, a French protestant unjustly accused of killing his son and made to suffer a horrible death similar to that of Damiens; or *Of Crime and Punishment,* the tract against capital punishment was written by Cesare Beccaria (though Pietro Verri was really behind him[36]) that led to the abolition of the death penalty for the first time in history, in the Grand Duchy of Tuscany. And yet the reasons for this growing awareness were less often avowedly Christian, or Catholic, and increasingly associated with cultural and ideological movements such as rationalism, which is indeed defined by its refusal to admit any derivation from the religious authority it claimed to have surpassed. Besides, to have done otherwise would have meant failure for rationalism historically, seeing that the church remained adamant in condemning it.

The position of the curate who proffers the crucifix to Damiens but cannot bring himself to kiss the living image of the crucified Christ standing before him, is a good example of the church's function, and at the same time exemplifies its unclassifiable nature, remaining irreducible to particular religious groups or denominations, to narrow partisan claims. If a scheme of religious affiliation were operating, there would be a *direct* connection with the Christian revelation as such; but in that case the same influence would have affected all Christian churches and denominations, whereas Eastern Christianity remained untouched by these phenomena, their effect being largely limited to Westernization in Russia and eastern Europe. If, instead, a scheme of denominational affiliation were in operation, as the historically predominant influence of Latin and Catholic Christianity would seem to suggest, then we might expect a retroaction different from what historically happened, or at least a conservative reaction less fixated with power and caste interests that ultimately barricade themselves behind the idea of the Church of Rome as a fortress under siege by modernity when, in reality, the influence

of ideas and customs verbally condemned as unacceptable is evident and pervasive—not to mention how much Western Christianity forwent to learn from its Eastern counterpart about showing due respect for one's own spiritual, mystical, and artistic tradition. This is a strange way to conduct a siege, a sign that things are not properly seen in these confrontational and consoling terms and that, on the contrary, the Christian mediation is bound increasingly to emerge and become visible in "things themselves," in men and women and their *facta*. Those *facta* must speak for themselves no matter what histories and paths led to them; and the present inquiry seeks to determine what they were, but without making an issue of it, involving in senseless squabbles over precedence. Historical phenomenology applied to Christianity shows that Christianity is destined to reside entirely within historical phenomena, in which it appears or disappears according to the response of the human actors, of the flesh-and-blood interlocutors touched by it. The fourth Gospel's vision of the sacraments and church provides guidance for this line of interpretation.

To justify his view of history Girard talks about a sacrificial Christianity that would be demolished by the affirmation of Jesus's revelation, and in effect there has ever thrived a persecutory Christianity in perpetual contradiction with the gospel message; for hundreds of years, as I have just said, the sacraments were refused to those condemned to death. However, what Girard presents as a dichotomy turns out to be an exaggeration and does not accord with history: in the first place, the gospel message, like the Bible as a whole, has never been antisacrificial in the sense Girard intends; secondly, it is untenable to attribute to Jesus an anthropological-religious omniscience detached from the cultural context to which he belonged; and thirdly, there are certain advancements in Christian thinking, such as the ideas illustrated by courtly love and Dante, that mark an important step forward in understanding the objectual *potentials* of the original message, precisely in their reference to a common tradition and to the Christological Mediator that inspired it. This last observation underlines phenomenologically not only that there is a tradition that can be recognized to a certain extent, but also that it has progressed in the most tortuous and unexpected ways, analogous to what we saw in regard to Judaism and the origins of Christianity; nor has it ever closed in on itself or been reducible to the intentions of individual actors, in the first place because its results are largely unpredictable but also

because it shows itself as acting systemically through the phenomena that go to make it up and interact with the infinitely changeable conditions of history.

In this way we obtain a contextual, nonmythographic reading of the moments of objectual progress that are to be recognized in this tradition, and at the same time its significant dynamism is not lost sight of, since it is by relinquishing its uniqueness that each moment comes to represent the tradition in its entirety, the full meaning with which it is invested. In that sense, the central position of Jesus's experience is confirmed since more than any other it embodied this twofold generating bond of incalculable renunciation and renewal that has made the Kingdom's law of forgiving transitivity humanly accessible, even so far as a death-transcending and thus definitive objectual reconstitution. This process as such will include not only setbacks, due to the obscurity and incomprehension surrounding collective and individual situations that are typically human, but also advances marking steps forward precisely because they adopt and are affected by previous steps. There is no need to reconstruct this long chain of transmission in detail, nor to establish from the start the relative proximity to its fullest meaning, in order to understand how we should go about studying and understanding it. What matters is that we are faced with all the continuities, discontinuities, and variations of a humanly real transmission of something that transcends it, above all from a systemic point of view, which leaves the way clear for religious interpretations that appear best-suited to explain its objectual content of truth.

Therefore there are no persecution texts as a distinct textual class, historically intermediate between archaic myth and definitive revelation, but there are countless *mythoi*. Some of these need the focus of condensation and signification of the mediation that sacrificial victims made possible; others at a certain point identify the victims and seek a new threshold of objectual mediation; and still others remain persecutory representations experienced as intrinsically necessary to the mediations that they have to support and that support them. In the Damiens episode we see how the old French monarchic mediation still persists. It is still strong enough to impose a death sentence by dismemberment in order to save the body and institutions of the state from dismemberment, but already too weak to make the payment of such a price convincing. And that is why Louis XV remained so surreally distant from an execution performed in his name, according to the distinction made

between the Crown and its holder, that is, between the mediation and its individual representative.[37] Within a few decades the distinction between the two became an irremediable rift and led to the principle of the Crown being replaced by the Nation, and to Louis XVI's rational dismemberment by means of the guillotine. It was all a struggle between political and public mediations, clashing and alternating with much bloodshed, without some *linear* influence from Christianity that would appear either to be taking part in events through its official representatives or watching impotently from the sidelines. This reminds us how weak the Christian mediation, as a public and collective mediation, had come to be in the West, following the progress in objectual representation and action that resulted not from Christianity as a particular religion or confession but from the content transmitted by its tradition, in competition with Judaism that ran alongside it like a kind of relentless shadow over the many centuries when Christianity had a share in power. The chronicle cited by Foucault faithfully reflects this state of suspension, variously complicit but consistently detached in its objectual indifference to the event itself: attitudes range from the conviction of the many onlookers that the condemned man deserved his treatment to the ambiguous conciseness of the chronicler, from the opportunistic or ideological dissociation of Voltaire to the putatively scientific sociology of the modern philosopher who tells us about it and is sensitive enough to begin a book of his with a piece like this, and insensitive enough not to devote a single word to its human and objectual implications.

If we use mediation and radical historicity as our means to interpret the unreal vacuum of Damiens's execution, and also of the contemporary accounts and later commentaries that tell us about it, the significance of the individual victim at the bloody center of events is in no way diminished, nor is his objectual relationship with the highest Christian tradition interrupted. These aspects can be represented without loss to the scientific nature of the inquiry, highlighting indeed the indisputable insight that reaches us, making its demands on our intelligence and conscience. At this point we can understand the significance of the crucifix in this scene; it appears to be accessory but has the significance of a *figura Christi* representing the person being executed in a procedure unconsciously modeled on the crucifixion of Christ, and thus he in turn becomes a *figura Christi.* Damiens's final identification with the crucified Jesus, in obedience to a mediation transcending

the horrendous situation in which he found himself, comes about through the loving gesture of a kiss. In recalling a transitivity completely negated by the sordid butchery in progress at the moment, this kiss acquires full sacramental value and extends to embrace the whole person of the tormented sufferer, bringing him into contact with an objectual dimension unknown to the mediations that mankind depends on: the dimension of a crucified God who let himself be destroyed on the cross in order to reveal an objectuality of a fundamentally different kind and to bear witness to it with words of reconciliation and forgiveness, words now spoken by Damiens and perfectly inaudible to all those who think they have good reason—political, scientific, and religious—for not listening. The Mediation that restores dignity as a human being to Damiens at the very moment when it is destroyed has nothing to say to anyone unwilling to see or hear. And the no-man's-land into which his execution took us ceases to express particular historical circumstances; instead it becomes the metaphor of our desire or determination to be blind and deaf. The ease with which we entrench ourselves behind psychological or sociological explanations shows how thoroughly averse we are to achieving any objectual perception that goes beyond personal interests and recognizes their conditioned and insubstantial nature as well as their requiring the objectual destruction of someone else.

Before moving on we should not overlook the phenomenological and objectual significance of the episode. Damiens and the few people who sense what is happening are not demonstrating some philosophical or theological theory but *show* something, by what they are and what they do. They are interacting with the reality and the price of human mediations, the same reality that Jesus himself came to be the figure in his crucifixion, representing it in the mediatory terms accessible to him and, by agreeing to pay the price, re-presenting—i.e., making present—the alternative mediation of the Father. A level of truth is reached that goes beyond the intentions and representations of the individual actors involved, not because it neutralizes and destroys them but because it makes visible the reality from which they spring. It is not what they think or say that determines this reality; the obverse is true: their thoughts and words are prompted by this reality, so unmercifully objective as regards what depends on mankind and so certainly affording objectual salvation as regards what depends on the divine Mediator. We have reached a phenomenon that, once detected, appears irreducible since it coincides with

the initial Mediation at the origin of mankind according to the hypothesis I am following here, and at the same time coincides with the maximum objectual fulfillment accessible to man. What we are dealing with here is an experience structurally similar to the disciples' experience of Christ's resurrection. While such an experience can be interpreted in terms of faith, we can and should recognize it on a phenomenological and historical plane. The choice is ours, not as an option of no importance offered to a solipsistic and fully empowered individual, nor as a theory to be embraced on the basis of logical and empirical inquiry, but as a de facto experience and interpretation by which to be guided, and through which the most exterior forms of allegiance and belonging become historical-cultural epiphenomena.

One effect of Girard's concept of the victim has been to stimulate reflection on an experience of this type, but his idea treats it too materially and assigns it to a classifiable category, which disregards the original historical phenomenon of the mediation and the objectual vista that is its very soul and purpose. Of quite different value as experience, and therefore as cognition too, is the access to the victim that recurs in the thinking of Bataille. He looks at a photograph of the Chinese *ling-chi* or death by a thousand cuts and is completely stunned:

> I did not choose God as object but, humanly, the Chinese youth condemned to death and shown in photographs streaming with blood while the executioner tortures him (the blade sticking into his knee bone). To that miserable wretch [*malheureux*] I was bound by the bonds [*lié par les liens*] of horror and friendship. But if I looked at the image *until agreement came,* the need I felt to be only on my own vanished: at the same time, this object I had chosen dissolved in the immensity, lost in a storm of anguish.[38]

Not choosing "God as object" means refusing God as a preexisting objective reality, as a categorial concept already defined; it means entering on the unexplored plane of the death of God, of the killing of God, where existence and inexistence merge and pass into each other because they depend on each other, where existence is possible thanks only to inexistence and life thanks only to death, and not just any death but the bloody death that generates a new objectual plane. Bataille remained in contemplation "*until agreement came,*" like a tuning fork that starts vibrating in harmony with some ancestral

music, but it is far from Pythagorean music because it is steeped in a horror so precise and penetrating as to become the source of the Absolute. This discovery of the victim has nothing categorial about it, appearing in the guise of "friendship," a *communication,* that is, a mediation, overwhelming and originary, forcing whoever it strikes to go out of themselves in an act of *ek-stasis* that, on the one hand, destructures and projects them into an unknown sphere dominated by the communicative, ecstatic event and, on the other, redefines them in a new way, founding their existence as subject in relation to an object. Being "bound by the bonds of horror and friendship" expresses this twofold originary and indissoluble bond, the paradoxical source of every bond, link, and *logos.* Bataille's is a type of experience that can only be defined as mystical and can be seen to correspond to the originating event as I conceive it if we make it center on a collective subject, established as such in relation to an ecstatic object that becomes mediator of a new relationship to reality, symbolic and cultural. However, the correspondence is not complete because Bataille is swept away by the uncontrollable dynamics of desire that emerge so strongly in his literary writings and fails to observe the homeostatic and objectual order attained by the system thus formed or its inner teleological end, all one with the symbolic, signifying dimension that defines it. Nevertheless, he points the way forward.

Not by chance, many of the major discoveries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries concerning sacrifice and the victim were made by thinkers (meaning philosophers, humanities scholars, artists, and writers) who did not proceed in conceptual and theoretical terms but started out from their own experience of mediation, where the father often figures as the condensing symbol. Among the writers whose work has a theoretical bearing on my enquiry, this is the case with Nietzsche, the mystical discoverer of the death of God. It was precisely in attempting to be on the side of the victors and sacrificers that he experienced the condition of the victim and represented it in himself.[39] It was inextricably bound up with his humiliating sense of inferiority toward Wagner, whom he both worshiped and execrated, but still more with the trauma of his father's death when he was not yet five years old, a bereavement to which he often returns in his early writings.[40] Freud is another case: by comparing himself with his father and with his own difficult situation as a Jew living in a Europe rife with anti-Semitism and pretotalitarian ideologies,[41] he discovered the origin of the notion of God in collective

violence. And Bataille, too, dominated by debauchery and a visionary insight into violence, and marked for life by the drama surrounding his father's death in 1917, dying from syphilis and abandoned by the family as the battle front moved forward. Girard, for his part, made essential discoveries about the victim, but the above criticism applies to his conception as well to the extent that he makes the victim an abstract category, altogether too theoretical, disregarding the conditions that make the victim a source of knowledge and meaning. Those conditions existed from the very start, and Judaism and Christianity did no more than look into them more thoroughly. I do not mean to imply that the victim should remain at a preconceptual level; the aim is exactly the opposite, that is, to ascend to a plane of theoretical reflection that takes account of these dangers and utilizes them, realizing that everything hinges not on the victim himself but on the mediation triggered by the victim.

The victim is such a poor guide to truth and knowledge that it has supplied arguments and pretexts without end for the many ideologies that have wanted to supplant Christianity and have turned for support to some preferred victimary category, whether real or imaginary: from the third estate in feudal times to nations demanding liberty and independence from foreign oppressors; from the wickedly exploited working classes to the Germany humiliated by the Treaty of Versailles; and down to the present day and the countless victimary categories used to justify any discrimination and persecution whatsoever. The inevitable conclusion to be drawn from this unhappy record is that the bare fact itself of the victim must remain completely ineffectual and impotent, incapable of giving access to any alternative reality, *unless* a different interpretive and guiding principle arises from its experience. And our confirmation of this comes from Plato, in the passage that sets out his ideas about politics and metaphysics most brilliantly, giving us the Greek version of the suffering just man Kant modeled on Spinoza.

In the second book of the *Republic* Plato discusses the definition of Justice. This is presented as *dikaiosyne,* that is, as the principle of what is right or just that can translate into an individual, internalized virtue in its adherents, and not as *dike,* the traditional term, which assumes a definition of justice as already operative and cosmically sanctioned. Here, then, we have a discussion of fundamentals that does not balk at anything traditional and, to that end, through the words of Glaucon, Plato performs an extraordinary

experiment. He imagines what would happen to a perfectly just man, who abides strictly by the Socratic principle of not wanting to do anything unjust to others however unjust they may be, in a human society consisting entirely of the unjust, that is, of people depending on structural processes of violence and oppression. The conclusion is peremptory: "the just man will be flogged, tortured, and put in irons, his eyes burned out and, after extremes of suffering, he will be impaled [*anaschindyleuthesetai*]" (361e–362a). The verb translated as "impaling" corresponds to the Athenian *apotympanismos,* a form of execution at the stake that was also used for petty thieves, and is exactly like crucifixion in many ways: a "walk of ignominy" preceded the excruciatingly painful death with further exposure to public humiliation and abuse.[42] The greatest of Greek philosophers thus came to identify something like the principle of the victim; he argued, however, that the victim as a bare fact in itself was ineffectual. A different principle gives the victim his revelatory and decisive power, and not the reverse; for Plato it is the suprasensible *eidos,* for Christianity Christ, but in either case it comes back to my experiential and historical idea of mediation. Certainly, Plato is indifferent to the fate of thieves and slaves put to death by *apotympanismos.* In his eyes, to be a victim is to place oneself at the lowest axiological level of Being, verging on pure nonbeing, and that is also an implicit criticism of his master, Socrates,[43] who was the hidden and manifest model for his perfect just man but nonetheless failed to reach a more positive mediation able to combat the violence of the unjust. It needed Christianity to identify in a social outcast executed in the most appalling way, in a Jesus Christ or a Damiens, the incarnation of divine Justice, inaccessible to mankind but perfectly visible to those with spiritual eyes to recognize it. However, this shows that the divine mediation comes to coincide with the victim being executed, thereby answering a question Plato had left secretly open; not that the victim as an immanent reality supplies the answer since, in that respect, it remains sadly true that anybody physically, morally, and socially annihilated is the perfect negation of all we understand by reality. Christianity therefore goes beyond Plato precisely in recognizing the truth of his argument, in terms of history and this world. This admirable intuition underlies Simone Weil's idea of misadventure (*malheur*), though she does not consider all the intermediate stages between the cosmic and tragic vision of the Greeks and the Judeo-Christian drama of the mediating, mediatory victim.

So I am not setting the victim in abstract opposition to the mediation of the victim since, in the perception we have today, the mediation must be seen as one with the victim; on the contrary, I am arguing that no abstract opposition should obstruct our access to the phenomenon in its historical and experiential entirety. In this regard, it appears quite clear that the category of the victim, paraded as an answer in and of itself, and perceived as an intramundane reality, is the principle cause of violence in our world. This is proven by the fact that since the rise of totalitarianism all ideologies and all demands from individuals and groups have ready recourse to violence to defend their downtrodden rights. In the absence of credible mediations making the victim an objectual truth, the outcome can only be disastrous, since it confirms and exacerbates the mediatory and objectual denial from which it derives. In that sense the central experience of Christianity, represented by the Crucifixion and relived by Damiens, covers the entire phenomenological and historical spectrum capable of taking in the victim *and* the mediation that makes the victim a definitively objectual source, starting from a transcendent Mediation incarnated in the victim.

This is the reason why the 1757 dismemberment produces a truth indistinguishable from the person reached by it, the same truth that speaks to us through the Old Testament's prophetic mediations, the Christological mediations of the New, and the spiritual experience of courtly love revealed to Dante in the Christic will to accept suffering and death out of love for others. This truth guides those that accept it and marks those that reject it. It guides the lips of Damiens to the crucifix, the hands of the confessors that hold it out to him, and makes the victim, now the living, suffering center of mediation, utter words that identify him with the crucified Christ he has just kissed: "Kiss me, Lords," a simple transitive logic that shows us *in corpore vivo* how the Christian mediation works. In suffering the destruction of his own body, this man of the people, uncultured and habitually dwelling in a fog of confused and violent aspirations, suddenly acquires a wisdom comparable only to the wisdom of certain saints. In all respects he comes to incarnate the crucified, resurrected mediation. Not even the compassionate curate fully understands him, since he does not dare kiss the real, living image of the Christ that is portrayed on the crucifix he is holding in his official capacity as priest. This lack of courage is a sure sign of the historical failure Christianity was heading toward at that time, soon to be overwhelmed by the attacks and

persecution that to some extent would restore the credibility it lost through overlong complicity with those in power. Only Sieur de Marsilly who kisses him on the brow understands, that is, relates, through an affective communion that is symbolic as well as physical, to the truth that Damiens at that moment represents and presents, and makes really present. There could be no better definition of the meaning of the Christian sacrament, completely in accordance with the profound interpretation given by John.

Here we are on an objectual level where everyone become actors and interpreters of the truth and where any response can only confirm the truth, whether it be to accept or reject it. This crucified, incarnate mediation coincides with self-judgment, the authentic dimension of Christian eschatology as we saw in the fourth Gospel and in Dante, and as Goethe magnificently intuited toward the end of his life. The fate of Damiens is soon accomplished: the poor devil's flesh is pared down almost to the bone by his executioners, and the horses finally succeed in tearing him apart. The *sparagmos* of Pentheus is thus repeated with enormous and senseless difficulty, only surmountable through the rationality of the technique. The still living torso was then cast onto the pyre together with the detached limbs. But this gruesome tragedy is now the Christian tragedy as recounted by Manzoni: destruction in this world becomes salvation in the destruction of Piazza and Mora who, at the end of the Column of Infamy trial, win back for themselves the truth and dignity of their innocence, denied by everybody, when they ask forgiveness for naming other innocents under torture, and suffer their own bodies to be tortured with a courage whose meaning we now know, with a heroism not mentioned in the history books or even in works of theology. This was inaccessible to Pentheus and Lycurgus, to say nothing of the Dionysian mobs that tore them to pieces, as it was even to Plato's formidable mind, not because of any religious or ideological conflict but because the mediations needing this confirmation were not yet able to see themselves, to turn their objectual gaze backward to the sacrificial conditions that opened this up to them.

Because of its emotional impact the subject appears to be available close at hand, and thus it easily lends itself to numerous misunderstandings, but its importance is such that before we continue with our comparative inquiry, we must digress for a moment to get a better grasp of what we have just witnessed, that is to say, the redemptive significance of sacrifice

in Christianity, not only in the first centuries but also in the period when Damiens lived and died.

### 3. Atonement in Christianity

We must return once again to a factor without which everything said so far might well be in jeopardy: the capacity of Christ's sacrifice to give meaning and direction (i.e., a future prospect) to even the most appalling states of objectual destruction; in theological terms this equates to its power to redeem evil and sin through the acceptance of suffering and misfortune, which are transformed into a means to salvation. Undoubtedly, for hundreds of years the cross has represented this power to redeem and give meaning, a power that can be assigned to the traditional category of atonement that must, however, be understood with its full semantic and mediatory value. The habit of many commentators and exegetes to recognize atonement only in certain specific rituals, such as the (often cited but seldom read) passage in Leviticus 16 where a scapegoat is abandoned in the desert to take the sins of the people on itself, is without any authentic scientific and historical basis: not so much because the real atoning sacrifice concerns the first of the two prescribed goats, the one actually sacrificed, while strictly speaking the second goat is an emissary,[44] but because, as the same chapter in Leviticus illustrates, all sacrifices in the ancient world had value to purify and save their beneficiaries, who are benefitted above all by not finding themselves in the place of the victim, whether offered with blood or abandoned. It is too often and too easily forgotten that in ancient civilizations there was constant interchange between animal and human sacrifice, with a dynamic always potentially substitutive, and with a concrete origin in critical and dangerous situations that sacrifice was to remedy, either preventing or curing the particular situation by effecting the substitution that could purify everyone. The flexibility and interchangeability of functions seen in the Old Testament is fully shared by the surrounding cultures, as is exemplified by the parallels between the Leviticus ritual, where a goat or a woman was expelled in the desert, and the Greek *pharmakos* who was a wretch variously stoned or drowned outside the city,[45] besides other rituals that can be discerned behind the religious images from the earliest Neolithic cult sites in the Anatolian area.[46]

The distinctive feature of the Hebrew religious texts is their tendency to subject this widespread logic of atonement to the criteria of the henotheistic and monotheistic mediation that finds expression in them. In this broader and originary meaning, sacrifice and atonement are superimposed and tend to tally with each other: quantitatively, because all the various forms of sacrifice have as their common factor the irreversible loss of something or someone that some benefit is expected to compensate; and qualitatively, since the sacrifice that more than any other qualifies as atonement, the blood sacrifice, is *the* sacrifice par excellence, the referential model for all other sacrificial rites, which it could not possibly be if there were any grounds for the abstract differentialism favored by the structuralists and by biblical scholars and theologians unversed in the history of religions.

In a negative, and negationist, way, the fact that atonement is generally discredited today is our warrant for its central importance. Any bloody, substitutive aspect of ancient sacrificial rites is repulsive to a modern mentality that views them, in its enlightened fashion, as barbaric customs that civilization has progressed beyond. Here, more than ever, we hear the voice of denial raised by the *Zivilisation* of every *Kultur,* a refusal against which Nietzsche and Thomas Mann, and even Bataille, protested. Within the Christian sphere, there are more internal reasons, linked to history, for the discrediting of atonement; it makes its first, spectacular appearance with the Protestant Reformation, the enemy of all sacrificial theology, which deemed it to be incompatible with the spiritual and transcendent nature of divine grace: the *sacrificium* is quite rightly equated with good works, regarded by Catholicism as an appropriate though not exclusive means to achieve salvation but condemned by Luther as magic and superstition making salvation through Christ depend on human actions. The Protestant reaction marked the great break with a world of mediatory and intermediating relationship, a spiritual/pneumatic *mundus imaginalis* stretching far back into antiquity and, up until that moment, ensuring stability in all societies and cultures; and it was this break that eventually made observable certain historical phenomena that were previously too pervasive to describe or explain theoretically. Though these paradigm shifts cannot be overstated—and without doubt they initiated a crisis in public mediations in western Europe that led to the convulsions of the modern revolutions—it is equally true that they continued a line already seen in the early and medieval church, that is, hostility

toward the crudely magical and performative aspect of sacrifices and rites; but this was now intensified and became a complete break. Moreover, the policy followed by the medieval church had answered a twofold criterion: on the one hand, prohibition and repression while, on the other, to concentrate and sanctify all performative intermediations and therefore all atonement in Christ's sacrifice on the cross. There was great cultural and pastoral wisdom in this attitude; besides the persecutory measures, such as the witchcraft trials (where in any case the accused underwent a process under law that was more easily controlled than the lynching it replaced), adjustments and developments in theology could be made that came closer to understanding the objectual significance of Christ's sacrifice and left room for *almost* isolated miracles such as the spiritual vision of courtly love shared by Dante. And yet the medieval formula, so intimately mediatory, remained unstable because it possessed no historically adequate vision of the question; to formulate such a vision it needed a threshold of definition, a breakpoint, and that came with the Reformation.

Following the Counter-Reformation, the value of atonement for mediation and salvation remained alive in the church, not only on account of the doctrinal pronouncements of the Council of Trent that emphasized the atoning, sacrificial meaning of the Eucharist. In pastoral and devotional practice, too, atonement often took a moralistic and psychologistic turn, the basis of an attitude called "dolorism". According to this theological distortion due to a shift of meaning in concepts and rules no longer fully comprehensible, every sorrow, every grief, is a providential occasion to atone for one's sins that are carried through life with a permanent sense of suffering and guilt and interpreted as an evil not to be rid of in any other way so that, as a corollary, pain and suffering, if not inflicted by other people or by nature, should be ardently desired and sought after. Dolorism is the internalization of the objective sense of sin and redemption found in St. Augustine or St. Anselm of Canterbury and reflects the gradual weakening of convictions once absolute, though that devout mentality continued to relate to the objective, transmissive character of the perdition from which man must be saved, and so the extreme nature of the evil appeared to justify any remedy, however drastic. The point is that in dolorism the individual himself sets about his own redemption but all the time feels farther away from achieving it, which corresponds to a typically modern sensibility, to which there are two principal ways to react: either by

open rebellion, which was Luther's choice with his theological arguments, or by a growing sense of guilt because the individual ascribes his state of doubt and anxiety to his own fundamental inadequacy, which is the path taken by a large number of Catholics.

From this point of view, Protestantism can be interpreted as a renegade dolorism that casts all doubt aside by absolutizing grace, but in so doing it breaks all the mediatory bridges that made grace accessible and representable. Catholic dolorism, on the other hand, can be interpreted as a Protestantism that ascribes its loss of conviction to guilt and casts aside all doubts by absolutizing the traditional mediations, first among them the church. Consequently, its image of the church is loaded and ideological, a church obsessed with a "complex" as being under siege, and ever farther from the theological, ontological, and cosmic harmony that Christian mediations once possessed. To assert itself and silence its own doubts, the Protestant position needed to demonize its great adversary, the Church of Rome, and lay at its door all the iniquity that had been taken off the individual; whereas the Catholic doloristic and devotional position, in its need to re-affirm itself, absolutized the ecclesial mediation in the form of perfectism and papal centralism. Out of the enthusiasm for his late conversion to Catholicism, Manzoni succumbed to the same temptation, though he overcame it in his maturity with the subtly nuanced ecclesiology of *The Betrothed*. In the novel the faintheartedness of Don Abbondio is the root cause blocking Renzo's marriage to Lucia; however, his opportunism is presented with humor, neither justified nor condemned but forgiven and accepted in a way that readers also feel they should be. Among both Protestants and Catholics atonement suffers a crisis and is either completely rejected or is transformed into an eventually morbid exercise in the attribution of blame; many Catholics, understandably, have wanted to be free of this, but at the same time they have jettisoned an entire forgotten heritage.

Thus there are weighty historical reasons behind the modern rejection of atonement, and we would be stupid to ignore them. In fact, in the most extreme Protestant formulation it is the factor that made it possible to examine atoning sacrifice scientifically without feeling conditioned or threatened by it, as had been the case in antiquity. Besides this, there are very good reasons for seeing a positive outcome from the rejection of atonement in the Catholic sphere as well. For example, traditional Christianity holds sin to be

judicially imputable for all eternity, but reflection has begun on the need for sin to have a moral rather than a starkly objective character, and least of all the collective character it had in the Augustinian and medieval theology of original sin. Thanks to this mentality, gigantic strides have been made in the historical-critical study of the Bible, of Jesus, and of Western Christianity, at first in Protestant countries and then more cautiously in the Catholic sphere. There is no parallel for this in the Eastern Christian churches or in any other world religion.

That said, and keeping in mind the historical mentality favored by these upheavals, we must now complete the picture by considering the partial nature and the shortcomings of the modern ousting of atonement and sacrifice. Two factors remain unanswered by this position: the crucial historical role of sacrifice that the most advanced modern theories about the origin of culture have no more than rediscovered; and the fact that evil, suffering, and death are not going to be eliminated from human life, so they are either senseless and not worth thinking about, which is the predominant attitude in the modern world, or else we must admit that the ancient Christian claim to provide a response to them is consubstantial with Christianity and cannot be taken from it. Eliminating doloristic morbidity does not amount to eliminating suffering and what it means for Christians. In support of this, there is the example of Bataille, a lay thinker with ideas acclaimed as liberating but in fact profoundly influenced by the Catholicism of his youth. Initially he experienced the atoning significance of the Crucifixion in a compulsive, almost uncontrollable manner, but in the end, for the most compelling existential, historical, and anthropological reasons, he recovered the sense of it, as we saw in his analysis of the photograph of the Chinese torture. A further example of no less merit is the Christian conception of Simone Weil, an original and entirely lay thinker who never converted to Catholicism officially but remained close to it; the redemptive power of misfortune is central to her thinking, without the slightest trace of rationalist negationism or doloristic devotionism.[47] Moreover, if we return to the Damiens episode we find more points that invite us to reflect further on the significance of atonement and sacrifice in Christianity. Between the objective concreteness of ancient religious positions and the anobjectual abstractness of modern theorizing, the execution of 1757 teaches us that the most fitting position is *median* and objectual, seeing the real person being executed as the source of every

mediation and the end of every mediation, the mediatory source that brings its end with it. The mediation of Christ's cross must have something decisive to say about this, without any theoretical or denominational categorizing, but simply by going along with the phenomena it helps us to recognize.

There is still a gray area in our analysis, and while it does not really prevent us from understanding, it might introduce confusing moralistic and intellectualistic distinctions and lead us back to categorial and ideological schemes we had previously ruled out. Our instinct might well be to set the victim, who excites our pity, over against his executioners, were it not for the fact that Damiens had made an attempt at assassination. In his own defense during interrogation he stated he had not intended to kill the king but only to frighten him into changing his policies; naturally, the judges did not believe his explanation, however true it may have been. And although the question is important from a moral and judicial point of view, it takes second place to our instinctive reaction on reading the account of the event, our tendency to overlook the criminal character of the condemned man. The scheme that prevails, and is always secretly invoked, is the good and the bad; the simplest solution is to make the detail of the criminal aspect subordinate, which has the effect of deadening the cognitive impact of the episode and of reducing it to a more or less confused emotional impression, so as to leave us with the memory of a poor devil put to death barbarically at a time in history now happily bygone. Or we keep our emotional reactions under control because they are too subjective and not scientific enough, and concentrate on the documentary angle, which validates a more general line of argument, assigning everything to the logical-intellectual or political aspect, much as Foucault did. Accordingly, the victim/executioner scheme either has absolute value, in which case we distort events, creating a consolatory simplification that makes us feel on the right side, or it has no value in relation to social and historical processes that we have made our task to reconstruct. In that case we empty events of all human content, dehumanize them in the name of philosophy and science, blind to what lies before our eyes. In both cases we discard the unwelcome part of the historical phenomena we ought to investigate and draw partial conclusions that prevent us from reaching a more comprehensive explanation, more in keeping with its *explicandum*. If, following Girard, we only see the victim and are entirely taken up with his truth, we fail to recognize the mediatory factors that made the victim necessary and

the victim's own derivation from them, ourselves becoming conditioned or indeed carried away by emotional and moral judgments that become moralistic, because they absolutize a single criterion and apply it without regard to circumstances. If, like Foucault, we take a more general historical and social analysis as our basis, we arrive back at factors of collective mediation, albeit incompletely conceived since their religious background is missing, but we fail to recognize the objectual significance and purpose of those factors, and deny the existence of human objectuality whereas it is actually central. It was precisely with the intent of destroying this that Damiens was put to death so horrifically: to teach an unforgettable lesson annihilating violators of the collective mediations and reassuring followers. In one case we have the victimary object, though without the mediation that gives it a historical function and cognitive power, so that it is unable to achieve its human significance and in the end loses itself in an affirmation unconcerned with its real state; in the other case the mediatory factor is present but its world-creating ends are so weakened that it remains without any objectual dimension at all, and eventually devolves into a brutal arrangement aiming solely at power and destined to disappear as soon as the balance of power changes, which amounts to denying the very existence of mediation.

The approach I am suggesting would instead retain both extremes of the historical phenomenon we are studying and bring them to interact with our position as interpreters involved in the *interpretandum* since we ourselves are historical and cultural subjects, that is, human beings existing wholly in a culture and a history and, for that very reason, interacting with a historical-cultural situation that we cannot say is alien to us. But this is the hermeneutic and transitive circularity that belongs to the Christian mediation, its most authentic potential, inseparable from the historical, existential, and physical reality of the individual who pays the highest price for mediations, so as to bring into view, in his own objectual destruction, the threshold of every objectual reconstitution. To some extent the interpretive process converges with and matches the content transmitted, a conjunction that sets off a new transitivity in which the object is found once more because it is destroyed. That is what occurred unconsciously in ancient sacrifices, with the margins of cognitive retroaction thus made possible but without achieving access to a completely objectual significance; and it is what happens in Christianity, with a cognitive retroaction that had never existed so fully and intensely

before, thanks to a mediation whose key, whose cornerstone, is this same retroaction entrusted to the human and historical reality of its object that proves to be a subject, and of its subject downgraded to being a mere object, a simple *obiectum,* and for that very reason restored to its objectual dimension.

This is the mediating and mediatory capacity of Christ's death on the cross, with which we can interact only by reliving, initiating in ourselves the silent, invisible transitivity that originates there. When that happens, the crucified Jesus takes upon himself the suffering and even the guilt of those who like him have been crucified morally, socially, physically, and transmits this unexpected opening, this chance for redemption, to them, and also to those who put themselves in contact with the mediation of the cross. In the execution of Damiens, Christ takes on himself the situation of the unfortunate wretch crucified by dismemberment, turning his agony and his errors into a peculiar form of atonement with power to involve the bystanders who connect and commune with him, and induce in us the same sense of involvement. The Christological circuit, or short-circuit, to which the Johannine doctrine of the Eucharist relates, signifies this. First and last, the essence of the mediation of the cross is Christian com-passion, sympathy with other people as a result of Christ's mediation, an experience with nothing sentimental about it since it is objective and objectual knowledge; and it corresponds to the friendship, the communication that Bataille talks about as he contemplates the photograph of the Chinese torture. The constitutive elements of sacrifice return here, but this time they interact fully with the existential reality of the individual being sacrificed and of anyone who shares his suffering, whatever the reason. In that way human objectuality is reestablished at the exact point and at the very instant it is destroyed, and this coincides with the incarnate 'dis-veiling' (a no more Heideggerian *aletheia*) of the divine mediation, wholly immanent *and* wholly transcendent. This subsumption in the divine mediation corresponds to the Christian idea of sanctification, the mediatory process that is both the operative precondition and the full consequence of the central event of atonement. Any sufferer sanctifies himself if his suffering is effective as a means for circular communication, transmitting and receiving sanctifying force to and from other people. The theological implications of the 1757 execution are hugely illuminating and make a clean sweep of all commonplaces, all unreflecting reactions. Damiens is not an assassin who, while remaining such, suffers a death so horrific that we forget he is not a

saint. The truth presented by the Christian mediation is completely different. In accepting his agonizing death he cleanses himself of all misdeeds and becomes truly a saint. This is the power of Christ's sacrifice; in making visible the pitiless human sadism of which he is the victim, he turns it into an occasion for mercy and salvation, taking the place of every victim subjected to the same fate and inviting us to do the same, that is, to take the place of others and make our suffering, whatever it may be, a sacrifice offered to God for our redemption and the redemption of others.

Joseph De Maistre, the Savoyard political philosopher who opposed the French Revolution and defended the Congress of Vienna and the Restoration in their attempts to react against it, expressed this principle incisively: "The guilty can all be *innocent* and even *saints* on the day of their execution [*supplice*]."[48] For him, Christ's cross introduces the principle of *reversibility,* in virtue of which all suffering can be undergone for the salvation of oneself and others, making the entire world, with its infinite suffering, an immense apparatus offering ways and means to salvation to whoever wants them. This remarkable thinker grasped the objective functioning of the Christian redemption though its compassionate and objectual aspect escaped him, and so his heartstrings vibrate when he condemns the massacres of the Revolution or clarifies the sacredness of the death penalty and the divine nature of war rather than when he vouches for the forgiving transitivity that is the secret of Christ's mediation. De Maistre helps us to understand the sacramental logic of the Eucharist, the sacrificial realism of the Epistle to the Hebrews, and the ritual background to all Old and New Testament writings: in other words, he was still mindful of the transforming power of sacrifice and of its cosmic and divine context. However, that does not prevent us demurring at his apologia for the death penalty or his all too famous description of the executioner-priest, pronouncements that feign to ignore the disgraceful butchery of the old executions staged for the mob and remain blind to the implications of the impassive techniques for execution that were on the way. Nor should it stop us from refusing any real political weight to his desperate efforts to find grounds to justify the ancien régime, though he argues with forensic skill it was some time since the régime had actually lived up to them. The Marquis De Sade proves more useful for understanding the dismemberment of Damiens and the serial guillotining of the Revolution, from his position in the top rank of the French aristocracy documenting the degree of abjectness,

approaching zero, reached by the monarchic mediation in France and not only in France. De Maistre's response to the fearful crisis of the French Revolution is to uphold the institutions representing the tradition, and like much of nineteenth-century Catholicism, he thought the papacy could be made the key institution; but nostalgia, in the absence of vigorous mediations to give it a future, can only confirm the dire objectual need at its origin, and regret for the loss of old glories can only foster fresh misfortune. De Maistre is not valuable for the remedies he offers, which verge on nightmare or the surreal, but for reminding us that Christianity is not a recipe to make the world a better place, but a means for keeping the light visible in the world, a world in which suffering will always be an integral part, which is by no means a superfluous statement given the obtuseness of the progressivism in which we are currently immersed. This is not the place to dwell on the faults of a certain type of Catholicism incapable of responding to the crisis of our time; we must stick to the core of the matter engaging us here, the value of the sacrifice of the cross for intercession and salvation, something that the livelier Christian thinkers—among whom Nietzsche, Bataille, and Simone Weil should be included—have in any case transmitted to us.

Returning for the last time to our mediatory anatomy of the crucifixion-dismemberment of Damiens, it now appears clear with a luminous clarity, that does not dispel but absorbs the bloody darkness feeding it, how he was sanctified through his acceptance and assimilation of the cross of Christ, and how, through this, he also died to sanctify his executioners. And I would like to close this parenthesis, which is not so much a parenthesis as a center, with a commentary greater than mine, taken from the text that has been a silent background to our study, *The History of the Column of Infamy;* it now emerges with particular relevance and allows us to complete what was said earlier about Manzoni. This is how he describes the behavior of the two main accused under torture, as they are being crucified by quartering:

> Both bore that protracted torture, that series of various tortures, with a strength that, in men many times overcome by fear of death and pain; in men dying as victims, not on account of some great cause but for a paltry accident, a stupid mistake, some simple, mean deception; in men who, becoming infamous, remained obscure and had nothing to oppose to their public execration except an ordinary feeling of innocence, which

> was not believed, and many times repudiated by themselves; in men (it hurts to think of it, but is it possible not to think of it?) with a family, wives and children, it would be incomprehensible were it not known to be resignation: the gift that makes it possible to see the justice of God in man's injustice, and in punishment, whatever it may be, the earnest not only of forgiveness but of the reward to come. To the very end, even on the wheel, they never stopped saying that they accepted death as punishment for the sins they had really committed. Accepting what could not be refused! words that might appear meaningless to those who only see the material effect in things; but words of clear and profound sense to those who reflect, or understand without reflecting, that what can be most difficult about a decision, and is most important, to convince the mind, to bend the will, is just as difficult, just as important, whether or not the effect depends on it; in accepting, as in choosing.[49]

This great and terrible theme causes Manzoni's style to proceed in a disjointed manner, broken like the bodies and lives of those unfortunate men, forcing us to reflect on every single word. The phrase, "it would be incomprehensible," seems to leave us virtually suspended in a void, as though annihilated by the overwhelming spectacle of horror and injustice, but then the same injustice, the same horror, once they are accepted, recombine in a greater, more luminous whole, in a message of salvation that nothing can destroy because destruction is itself instrumental in it. Manzoni touches the very dynamic of the sacrifice of the cross and of its power as substitute sanctification. It is seen again in his tragedy *Adelchi,* about a Longobard princess, Ermengarda, married to Charlemagne but repudiated by him for political reasons. Her fate is to die of a broken heart at being abandoned, but she can, nevertheless, through her acceptance,

> To the God of saints ascend,
> A saint through suffering [*santa del suo patir*].[50]

The secret of Christianity is this, this humanly incomprehensible power by which suffering, despair, and death become an offering joining heaven and earth, a mediation that unites when all else divides, an invisible bridge over an abyss it would but cannot eliminate. It is the grace assured to Faust by

Gretchen's love and the intercession of the Virgin, an unconditional love that for that very reason becomes the one essential condition, the final guarantee when no other guarantee is possible on earth. All this takes us back once again to the cross. Its coordinates show the convergence of distinctions that have been with us throughout this inquiry, not because they have been cancelled but because they are fulfilled, in the absolute copresence that reveals the mystery of the human phenomenon.

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After touching these heights, quite indispensable once their significance is realized, we would do well to recover the objective and objectual distance needed to confirm the independent cognitive value of what led up to them, not with some mistaken scientistic notion in mind but out of fidelity to the historical manifestations of the phenomena in question. They must speak for themselves, as soon as they reach transparency, and certainly to the full extent that they do. For the purposes of this inquiry, the historical and religious explanation of the cross I have outlined is already sufficient, but there is still one piece of argument to add to it that may finally answer the comparatist problem posed at the outset. And that will allow us to appreciate a hermeneutic advantage, and not a minor one, inherent in the phenomenological-historical approach that I advocate and have followed.

So far we have seen how any thinking about the Christian mediation, whether historical, philosophical, exegetic, or theological, that wants to be more aware, more able to look at itself, must place reliance, considerable at times, on writers normally thought to have no direct relation, or even only a polemical one, with Christianity—such as Goethe, Nietzsche, and Bataille. This indicates significantly not only how deep and widespread is the influence of Christianity but more than that how it works proceeding by virtue of itself, by virtue of the objectual content it helps to reveal. The content asserts itself as soon as we allow it to emerge and place it against the appropriate cultural and comparative background that shows it as universal and inseparable from the contribution made by all ages and civilizations, starting from the civilizations with which Christianity, and Judaism before it, had to contend in order to establish themselves.

So it should not be too much of a surprise, or rather it should only surprise us at first, as a realization dawns upon us of the bankruptcy of our ideological

and cultural divisions, to find that the missing link needed to complete the comparative spectrum of the cross of Christ comes from Sigmund Freud, a writer who would appear to have little to do with a study of Christianity occupying itself with reconstructing its aims in a phenomenologically and hermeneutically appropriate manner. In spite of appearances, however, the founder of psychoanalysis has something important to say about the symbolical meaning of the cross of Christ, and his contribution is all the more valuable for being unplanned and unintentional. With the objectivity in discovery of all authentic thinkers, Freud, the skeptic and nonbeliever, helps us to complete the comparative picture that the early Christian apologists lacked. The atonement of the cross returns in the most unexpected form, in dispassionate and (apparently) detached argumentation.

## 4. The Redemption of the Cross in Freud

Freud's comparative contribution is contained in *Totem and Taboo,* a milestone in modern thought about human origin that, as far as I know, has never been examined from a specifically Christian viewpoint, which is not entirely without reason when we recall that Freud made no secret of his fundamental skepticism about religion.[51] He was both hostile to religion, convinced it was nothing but the paternal projection of a human race too frail not to look for neurotic compensations in an empty and Oedipal heaven, and was one of the leading theorists bent on sweeping away all religious mediations, a bent of common currency for many people nowadays. And yet, thanks to his anthropological intuition, which was to lead years later to his restoring the original significance of collective identifications, Freud discovered the historical and redemptive value of the cross of Christ, and all this he achieved against a strictly comparatist background. Clearly, the tone of his argument is muffled compared to the emotional involvement generated by the spectacular executions of the ancien régime, but the cooler tone has the advantage of being most suitable for an independent, historical verification that is manifestative in the phenomenological sense. Moreover, we must adopt an approach that is adequately differentiated and analytical to extract the crucial core of Freud's argument from such an unexpected quarter.

The anthropological and religious gemstone buried in *Totem and Taboo,*

a text already subject to misunderstanding, has in fact to be extracted from the more strictly psychoanalytical and positivistic gangue in which it is enclosed, but the legitimacy of the whole operation seems to me proven by its results. And the passage in question—perhaps it needs pointing out—is all the more worthy of our consideration since it aims to demonstrate definitively, and on a comparative basis, the anthropological immanence of the religious and of Christianity, something that is nowadays taken for granted in any discussion of the subject that claims scientific objectivity. Thus, Freud's "scientific myth" of the murder of the primordial father—as he ironically defines it in *Mass Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*[52]—cannot be accused of utilizing an unproven and unpalatable hypothesis since the assumptions behind it are generally admitted by its detractors. The point to be gained is that by looking at the data in a thoroughly unbiased, objective way, which was the proud boast of the positivism shared by Freud, we reach a phenomenological plane where the data speaks for itself and brings the genetic, historical element to the surface, which neither positivism nor phenomenology ever thematized though they prepared for its coming historically, for its advent we might say.

As was often the case with Freud, his observation of the data was not quite as accurate as promised, and like everyone else, he did not accept Nietzsche's argument for opposing Dionysus to Christ, for the difference that emerges from the very similarities between their two stories.[53] Instead, for him it was obviously one and the same story and therefore had the same meaning. But let us see what happens when, from the terrain of the *mythos,* from which Nietzsche could not detach himself and on which Girard focuses, Freud moves on to deal explicitly with rites. This time his instinct as a great clinical observer is just as true as ever. Naturally, as a psychoanalyst, he starts from his theory of the murder of the primordial father, an event, as he sees it, transmitted to Christianity as a consequence of the guilt originally felt by the horde of murderous sons. He identifies the original sin of the Bible tradition with that ancestral crime, and so sees Christ's death as an act of reparation for it. Let us follow the basic steps in Freud's argument:

> Without doubt, the original sin of mankind in the Christian myth is an offense against God the Father. Now, if Christ frees men from the burden of original sin by sacrificing his own life, we are compelled to conclude that this sin was murder. According to the *lex talionis,* deeply rooted in

> human sensibility, only the sacrifice of another life can atone for murder; sacrificing himself can be traced back to guilt at shedding other people's blood [*Blutschuld*]. And if this sacrifice of his own life leads to reconciliation with God the Father, then the crime to be atoned for can only be the killing of the father.[54]

The last sentence sounds the most typically psychoanalytic, and to some extent must reassure many readers, coming as it does in the midst of ancestral reconstructions that give rise to demur as much as the theologoumena that the writer has momentarily to negotiate. Freud maintains his theory of the *Urvater,* who as such is designated to be the victim, because he does not realize the father can only play this role as a symbolic function which goes beyond the simple instinct drive because it has closely to do with the threshold of culture. From their different perspectives, both Claude Lévi-Strauss and Girard made this objection; however, their further criticism that Freud traces everything to a single event is by no means correct, since the Freudian father remains a kind of sacrificial variable, taking very diverse substitutive forms, even to the extent of being identified with the totemic animal, which is the starting point for the fourth essay of *Totem and Taboo*. In truth, the meaning of the final sentence in the passage quoted above is not confined to the psychoanalytic normalization Freud had in mind, which was promptly taken up by his followers unaware of the fruitful complications of the master's laboratory. The real connection active in the permanently sacrificeable paternal function in Freud's psychoanalysis, when that function is not directly sacrificed, is mediation. It is visible in the concept of identification, but it only emerges as an originary collective phenomenon in *Mass Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*; there, however, it is unable to assert its independence from the Oedipal father who has the task of squaring matters with the energizing and sexual libido, always the *primum movens* in psychoanalysis. This mediatory excess is already visible in the scene of origin in *Totem and Taboo* where the *Urvater* seen as an "envied and feared model [*Vorbild*]" is torn to pieces by his sons and devoured in the homophagy recognized by Freud as the source of humanity; these cannibal sons, "in the act of devouring, achieved complete identification [*Identifizierung*] with the father, each taking a part of his strength from him."[55] The mimetic rivalry process serves solely to introduce a symbolic

and physical identification at the heart of the totemic meal theory derived from Robertson Smith, and takes us back to the most primitive form of mediation reflected and transformed in the Eucharist. Identical in form to the biological act of devouring, this *Ur-Identifizierung* is nevertheless able to invest that act with potentially unlimited significance that expands it and goes beyond it.

While it is true to say that the killing of the *Urvater* is too rigidly predetermined as identification *of* the victim, it is equally true that the identification *with* the victim takes us closer to a correct mediatory function, with Freud's father-figure becoming its symbol and prime example. In the passage about the cross, the full and profound meaning of the "crime to atone for" is not the killing of a banal psychoanalytical father that the psyche immediately learns to kill fictitiously in its eagerness to develop: it is the collective killing of God that Nietzsche speaks of in aphorism 125 in *The Gay Science,* following his own father's death and his disillusionment with Wagner; and it is the originary communication that came to Bataille some decades later in the overwhelming experiences of his father's dying agony and the Chinese photographs. When Girard remarks that what matters is not the father as such but rather an anonymous, naked victim transformed into a divinity, he is jumping at once to the conclusion of a universal principle without considering the symbolic and historical significance of the paternal mediator, and so misses the type of relationship that crystallized at the dawn of culture, a relationship that could mediate the objects that had been only the goal of instinctive impulses before then, starting however from areas of objectual gravitation necessarily tied to biological objects. Freud does not distinguish the basic constitutive process that causes culture to emerge but he conveys it nevertheless, amidst a series of reflections that confuse and muffle it but do not entirely obscure it.

We are thus in a position to appreciate the force of his argument in its simplicity, the requisite simplicity of all the most memorable discoveries. And we may very well grasp it now that our preliminary observations and additional information have provided a suitable context for his words:

> In that way, in Christian doctrine mankind recognizes, in the most open way possible, the guilty act committed in the primal time [*Urzeit*], since it is now fully atoned for in the sacrificial death of the only Son.[56]

There is strict ritual symmetry in thus making visible in the cross an action committed in the *Urzeit* of mankind, an action from which the whole of humanity descends and derives. Since the act by which Jesus Christ redeems mankind from original sin is a killing, it follows that the sin from which this act must cleanse mankind is in turn a killing. Consequently the historical origin of mankind—chiefly understood as the genus *Homo*—is a killing, exactly as the madman in Nietzsche's aphorism 125 declares, unheeded by the crowd, both in the text and outside it, and exactly as experienced by Bataille. Suddenly there is an unexpected rational explanation for a whole series of traditional theological arguments that seem abstruse and deplorably savage to a contemporary mentality that considers itself emancipated, though misinformed in this more often than not. Killing the Son, the satisfaction required by the Father as vicarious reparation for the injustice done by our ancestors, is no longer an inexplicable human sacrifice, so scandalizing to modern right-minded persons, but shows itself to be the translation into theological and metaphysical language of a revelatory retroaction triggered by the choice made by the preacher from Nazareth and producing incalculable consequences. Translated into terms of vicarious satisfaction, which are the only historically pertinent terms to describe the divine mediation, this retroaction makes a different mediation accessible, the mediation of love preached and witnessed by Jesus. The divine "justice" restored and the divine "honor" redeemed of which St. Anselm speaks are shown to be one with the courtly love that Dante describes,[57] in the sense that they introduce a reversal, a reversibility through which divine mercy finally becomes visible, transforming human injustice into an instrument of a superior justice by which men are judged and saved according to the criteria of the Johannine fulfilled eschatology, criteria that Manzoni and Goethe recovered through Dante.

I speak of a rational explanation, but as is the case with every authentic explanation and with every authentic, nonideological use of rationality, Freud's explanation of the cross, contrary to his expectations, does not clear up the mystery. Instead it is now defined and circumscribed, made more profound and precise, and offered for our meditation, presenting us with confirmation that could not be more unexpected or more scientifically objective, more phenomenologically enabling of what it reveals.

Freud imagines his theory will throw fresh light on the cross, not realizing that all the validity of what he asserts really comes from the mediation he has half glimpsed and, as far as it relates to history and religion, from the intermedial and mediatory significance that the cross has assumed in Christianity, unconsciously directing his ideas and his words, in a way not wholly unlike what happened to Nietzsche, as we shall next see. The illuminating example of Freud in fact brings us to a final important aspect of the symbol and reality of the cross, namely its cognitive interaction with the devastating panorama of twentieth-century history. In this it appears to become lost and in many respects effectively is, and we find it instead in forms and along paths unlikely to please those who prefer a predictable, conventional image of Christianity, whether they intend to welcome it wholeheartedly or reject it. And so we come to the most embarrassing historical phenomena that concern us, the phenomena that speak to us of the world devoid of mediations in which we live.

7.

# The Cross in the Modern World

## 1. Christianity and the Death of God

The cross is an incandescent undercurrent running through the evolution of Nietzsche's ideas; in the early poems it is still spoken of in devout terms, but like a stream of volcanic lava it gradually builds up until it finally explodes and erupts in his last written works. Already in aphorism 125 of *The Gay Science* it secretly plays a strategic role. This founding text for the death of God in modern times has been reiterated and annotated ad nauseam by philosophers in the belief it validates their stereotype of the nonexistence of God; and like all stereotypes, this one, too, has crystallized around a grain of truth. The inexistence of God is indeed a part of the aphorism's intended message, but it is not asserted to be irreversible, as the usual much-abused cliché claims, since that is precisely the attitude of the people to whom the madman—Nietzsche's spokesman—directs his tirade, the crowd in the marketplace, made up of "many who did not believe in God," who greet with derisive sarcasm the madman's initial proclamation, "I am looking for God! I am looking for God!," a provocative exclamation that nobody imagines is a twice-repeated optative addressed by the speaker in the first place to himself.[1] What Nietzsche wants is infinitely more than

uninformed, mundane atheism: his aim is to have God's nonexistence understood through the realization that a murder was committed by mankind at the dawn of time, a killing that mankind should now defiantly claim as its most glorious achievement, surpassing everything so far and ushering in an over- or supermankind capable of drawing on the very source of the divine mediation.

Nietzsche is not great because he identified an origin in sacrifice that he was happy to recognize as long as it could be made to serve his ends, but because of the reckless force with which he made his own the divinizing ecstasy of sacrifice, using it like a sledgehammer to demolish any pretense of a cultural and social nature that thought itself independent of this same origin. He knew perfectly well there could be no return to ancient sacrifices: what guided him was not unrealistic nostalgia but an awareness that mankind has always needed divine mediations in order to exist and indeed had its origin in the ancestral, collective killing of God, that is to say, in a killing that *is* God, the divinizing event that gave birth to mankind. It is this that makes the announcement of the death of God so unforgettable; it recaptures a death that is God and at the same time is the birth of mankind and evokes a theogony that is also an anthropogony, effectively sparked off by the violent killing that is inseparable from the killers' ecstatic experience. Nietzsche's aim was to recover the remote past in order to map out a not so distant future, a grandiose closing of the circle that would establish the Eternal Recurrence of the Same, reaffirm the Dionysian law of the cosmos, and see the advent of the superman or overman (*Übermensch*), understood as the individual who becomes master of the theogonic and anthropogonic secret through its realization at firsthand in himself. In that way the overmen make themselves "worthy" of such an act; they kill God and have him reborn in themselves: "Shouldn't we also become gods?"

Bataille, in the 1930s, was alone in seeing his way to resume this lucid, exalted program, understanding that the French and the West in general, due to their disastrous ignorance of its real nature, were incapable of reacting to the challenge of totalitarianism,[2] fooling themselves with the false representations of the crowd in the marketplace. Totalitarianism was triumphant, with particular virulence in the version of National Socialism, presenting the masses with the prospect of a theogonic experience in the wake of ritual violence, performed in perfect innocence through the absolute

justification of the Chief, the *Führer*. Moreover, because he understood Nietzsche's prophetic role in European history, Bataille could do justice not only to the exploitation of Nietzsche's writings by the Nazis, which had the blessing of his sister Elisabeth, but also to the accusation repeatedly made in critical writings on Nietzsche that he was responsible for Nazi ideology. In Bataille's view, Nietzsche was a precursor, only in part and still hampered by the awkward aspects of his idea of the will to power,[3] of an earth-shaking underground movement that was to take twentieth-century man to the edge of the abysses of Nothingness and inane cosmic expenditure, a Nothingness producing starry splendor and divine glory, gaining possession of which was crucial to avoid leaving it at the mercy of mountebanks and persecutors. And so Bataille, precisely because he followed closely in Nietzsche's footsteps, was able to work out a more daring and complete synthesis, intended to skirt the stumbling blocks that had thwarted Nietzsche's efforts. But what were those stumbling blocks? And here we come to the elusive place occupied by the cross of Christ in Nietzsche's thinking, a position at once central and repudiated.

Anyone not completely anaesthetized by the commonplaces expressed about the death of God as a kind of manifesto of contemporary atheistic disenchantment must be struck, on rereading aphorism 125, by the deafening silence that enshrouds the religion founded by the killing and resurrection of the Son of God. Undeniably, any protracted historical and religious explanations would have robbed the text of its extraordinary concentration, but even so it is odd there is no open mention of the real killing of God, the Dionysian event, set against the false killing of the Christian God, full of moralistic reproach for mankind and an entire world that only continue to exist by virtue of continual blood sacrifice. At least it might have found a place elsewhere in *The Gay Science,* in other aphorisms where references to Christianity are certainly hostile but somewhat predictable and far from well-thought-out; such see-sawing is, in any case, a feature of all Nietzsche's writings on the subject where flashes of genius often alternate with inaccuracies and gaps in his knowledge. However, the conclusion of aphorism 125, which is no less meaningful than the earlier parts, shows that the killing of the Son of God was deliberately left out, and this omission has an essentially opposite meaning to the recurrent anti-Christian polemics that send so many readers into raptures:

> The madman is also said to have burst into several churches on the same day and intoned his *Requiem aeternam Deo.* When chased out and questioned, he is said to have invariably answered only in this way: "What else are these churches still, except the graves and tombs of God?"[4]

The close of this aphorism does not normally receive the attention it deserves, evidently being thought little more than an ornament since the announcement of the nonexistence of God has already been made, but the picture changes once we start to consider the far more serious and dramatic meaning that the text wants to transmit. Nietzsche is saying that the madman's announcement is made twice over, symmetrically: first, in the marketplace, the symbol of a society in which atheism predominates and finds expression in the custom of universal marketability, of purely economic fungibility; and secondly in churches, symbolizing Christians who ought to actively represent faith in God and in the eternal life of God. We can now understand the destabilizing truth presented by Nietzsche and elucidated by Bataille in the twentieth century, namely, that there is no basic difference between the conventional atheism of the folk in the marketplace and the equally conventional fideism of people who say they believe in God without considering, in all its awesomeness, the central drama of the killing of the Son of God. Both cases fall *far short* of conceiving the death of God as a real killing of God, and lose all reciprocal differences in their in-difference to the question of the origin of God from the murder of God, a lack of perception that makes them irrelevant and inessential in the final analysis. Nietzsche prides himself on knowing the decisive question of his time is vested in him, and this consciousness gives him the raving figure of a prophet, which the general incomprehension that surrounds him only serves to confirm.

The ecclesiastical close to aphorism 125 provides a rather un-Derridean polemical supplement and, compared to the usual anti-Christian tirades of the other texts, appears much more relevant and profound, albeit more than the speaker intended since Nietzsche is giving added momentum to the announcement he was the first to receive, which in fact induced him to push beyond the misrepresentations and clichés he usually relied on and would later rely on even more, in order to liquidate the Christianity he loathed. Here, more than ever, just as when considering the ultimate sense of Nietzsche's fate, the objectivity of the content brought to light by his daring

explorations must be allowed to emerge phenomenologically, and we must be careful not to jettison any of the precious stellar material that the Nietzschean supernova throws out in all directions, on the faint-hearted or morally fastidious pretext that it is too hot to handle. Through its attitude of denial, conventional Christian fideism ends up denying its own heritage, rejecting the fundamental announcement (*kerygma*) of a God murdered by men; and this betrayal makes Christian churches, in Nietzsche's words, "the graves and tombs of God," places where God, having been killed, is put out of sight and out of mind.

The content of the second announcement remains strictly the same as before; what changes is the evaluative nuance, which is vital if we are to understand the method followed by the madman in his madness. He does not enter the churches to deliver the same sensational and provocative speech but restricts himself to intoning his "*Requiem aeternam Deo*" in ironic resignation, as if by now he thought it pointless a priori in an official place of worship to launch any sort of proclamation with the idea of shaking up the regular worshippers there, let alone attempting to win them over. Proof of this is the lightning speed with which he is chased out of the churches, out of every one of them without exception; the plurality of these places of worship might well allude to the numerous churches and Christian denominations in Germany, certainly familiar to the son of a Lutheran pastor. The promptness and unanimity of the churches' reaction in expelling the madman accords with a yet more serious and basic removal resulting from the cheap atheism of the people in the marketplace: its denial of a content, a "truth" (in quotation marks since Nietzsche would never have applied the word to Christianity) that should have been in the safekeeping of the Christian churches. In that sense, the phrase about churches, both as buildings and as ecclesiastical institutions, being turned into graves and tombs of God sounds sinister and specific, since the rotting, stinking corpse of the murdered God, as it is gruesomely described in the marketplace tirade, is finally laid to rest there, to rest there forever, that is, in the intention, or rather lack of intention, of the so-called believers. Thus Nietzsche's Dionysian god is resurrected to go against the Christian churches, but on the grounds, no matter how poorly calculated by this strange prophetic enemy of Christianity, that these churches go against their own *depositum fidei,* their own truth. So Nietzsche is also talking about the Christian God above all and tacitly admits the

prophetically biblical nature of the madman's announcement. However, this implicit admission is not only a scathing warning to Christianity about its ability to endure if it shirks the drama of its authentic message, but also, with the immediacy of an ongoing personal drama, it reveals a contradiction in Nietzsche's thinking itself since his proclamation inadvertently appears more Christian than anything said in almost two thousand years of official and institutional Christianity. Nietzsche approaches the truth of Dionysus, and it turns out to be the truth of Christ. Such a disconcerting conclusion would be taken to nullify all his conscious plans, all his manifestos and proclamations; to escape from it he would have to avoid the two extremes between which his thinking continually fluctuates.

He therefore needs to have knowledge "in the field," to use a military expression very much in his style, that is to say, to be able to maneuver and manipulate at will, since overmuch clarity would deliver him up to the horror of the Dionysian ecstasy, as shown us by Euripides in his extremely guarded manner, *and* to the horror of Christ nailed to the cross, as Bataille attempted to describe in the twentieth century. Keeping his distance from both the horror of the ecstasy and the ecstasy of the horror, Nietzsche tries to exploit the divinizing impulse of the former and the latter's historicity and finality as an event, his object being to promote the advent of a new age and a new posthumanity, represented and realized by the overman. However, this final effort at resolution only aggravates the flaws present at its origin, existential gaps that it should have filled. A mediation is created with the objective and objectual material available, and Nietzsche cannot fall back on the ancient solution that achieved the objectual dimension at the cost of destroying a single object, nor does he want to resort to the Christian solution where the single object accepts destruction in order to offer a definitive objectual dimension to all mankind. Over him there looms a twofold double bind, the bind of the objective origin of humanity and the bind of its objectual destiny, and he makes every effort to prevent the fatal conjunction of these two double binds, to avoid them coming together and blending into a single truth that would nail him down, that would make him Dionysus who is Christ crucified and Christ crucified who is Dionysus, as he signed his name by turns in the loose notes written in early January 1889,[5] though the most sensational written confirmation was still to come. In labyrinthine meanderings intended to make him appear to be Dionysus

crushing the crucified Christ but without looking *too* closely at either of them, Nietzsche is forced to follow an oblique and wavering course that alternates reticence with sudden outbursts, allowing him to isolate the targets for his polemic and, whether those targets are generic or more specific, his tone always sounds like someone cashiering an opponent once and for all. But in its repetitions and elaborations his vacillating course only serves to define the central point of its oscillations and gradually closes in around that point. And that is our most suitable interpretive key if we want to understand his last years of life and not miss the infinite, implosive energy of the final starburst.

Not surprisingly, commentators writing about the death of God, in their eagerness to reach predetermined conclusions and avoid more awkward comparisons, have transformed Nietzsche's prodigious theogonic and anthropogonic contrivance into an insipid manifesto of atheism, a harmless nihilist proclamation, forgetting that he regarded nihilism as a purely instrumental, intermediate stage, not as an end in itself to be contemplated with smug self-satisfaction.[6] Ironically, as a result of Nietzsche's efforts, most readers and commentators end up adopting the place of the madman's audience in the marketplace. The text owes its great celebrity to this misunderstanding; without it, nobody would have given it a second thought. It would not have been taken into the least account, as is the ritual procedure in our culture, so packed with ideas and works unfailingly consigned to the crowded oblivion of its unconscious, oblivious only to itself.

In actual fact, however, the misunderstanding is partly due to the aphorism itself, since it draws its strength from a tactical silence about Christianity that is designed to give prophetic force to the text while at the same stroke robbing all the force from the historical exponents, by avoiding any allusion that might indicate their suppressed presence except for the closing criticism of the faint "believers" of his time, which remains the author's sharpest attack on modern Christianity. In a word, interpreters have the author's complicity, almost his personal authority, for overlooking what the piece clearly spells out, even though it shouts it: the killing of God by men, by mankind as a whole or, to be more exact, by beings that were to *become* men, modeling themselves on the transfigured aspect of the divine otherness. The overmankind, destined in aphorism 125 to become divine, had only to take the final step, to take on the divine identity that

until then had acted as a distinction, thus to bring about the final fusion of theogony and anthropogony. In this there is an intuition of another factor latent in Christianity, also buried beneath theological formulas that are often, and willingly, considered to be definitive: the factor of the transitivity between human and divine, the entire transmission to mankind of God's mediatory dynamism, as profoundly understood in the fourth Gospel and substantially announced by the prophet from Nazareth. But it is precisely at this point that the *ratio* of Nietzsche's partial silence becomes apparent: his desire to take over this sensational circularity and attribute it to Dionysus, to any mediation at all as long as it is not Christ's. He therefore exploits for all he is worth the prophetic register characteristic of aphorism 125; at the same time, however, in declaring his new divinizing mediation, he attempts to break definitively with his religious model, a model at once manifest and hidden, proclaimed and denied. This explains the enormous commitment to his most ambitious work, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. But in spite of the riches of style and intelligence lavishly displayed there, a dispassionate reading shows that it has no alternative Word with which to replace the hated Christianity other than the clever inventions of a writer of genius, and that it has an air of velleity that aims at parody and replacement, an intention clearly betrayed by Nietzsche's constantly inverting passages taken from the Bible. Zarathustra's mediation never gets off the ground and remains fastened to its artificial symbols, both too Greek and too modern; and there is unintentional irony in its reliance on a religious figure remotely related, through the Persian domination, to the later development of Judaic monotheism and its eschatology.

The failure of *Zarathustra* as a mediatory manifesto became clear in 1883 at the time of Wagner's death, an event that brought on a mental breakdown documented in Nietzsche's letters and in the strident tones of the last part of *Zarathustra*.[7] It is no coincidence that the attacks on Christianity grew more frequent from this moment since he identified it with the paternal and Wagnerian mediation by which he felt betrayed. His urge to overcome this feeling at all costs led to a final duel with the cross of Christ, recorded in some revealing texts whose salient moments we must now look at.

## 2. The Idiot on the Cross

The signal for the attack to settle matters with Christianity, whose silent presence had long dogged Nietzsche's career as a thinker, came in the last feverish months before mental collapse finally sealed his fate. In this attack the most sensational document is *The Antichrist: The Curse of Christianity,* a title intended to express the complete obverse of Christianity, while its tone puts the accent on the prophetic register that Nietzsche could certainly not forego at this moment of reckoning. This short book gives up a historical-critical approach of which the work of D.F. Strauss remained the unreachable paradigm (not by chance an isolated praise escapes the author: *des unvergleichlichen Strauss,* "the incomparable Strauss"[8]), and implied an overall historiographical failure, but in 1888 Nietzsche had no more time for that and was ready to exploit the thrust of the announcement of the death of God in order to go beyond the Christic figure that is his hidden, haunting "anti-." In this work brimming over with invective, his strategy consists in separating Christ's death on the cross from his person and teachings, thereby neutralizing the significance for salvation of the Crucifixion, which he regards as a figment of the morbid imagination of his disciples, especially of the detested St. Paul who made it the basic theme of his theology. Nietzsche therefore tries to minimize and make fun of Christ's crucifixion to prove that he is talking about only one death of God, the death of Dionysus, the sacrificial god killed and reborn at the everlasting feast of the Eternal Return, which "[in] the pagan cult is the great *annual cycle* [Jahreskreislauf], the cult turning upon its interpretation."[9]

In the face of this dazzling audacity, the most typical mistake is to minimize its significance and fall back on the stereotypical view that Nietzsche's target was Christianity, not Christ, but that is a sophism requiring us to ignore what he himself wrote—though admittedly the annotators of aphorism 125 are well practiced in doing just that. It does no great service to the prophet of Dionysus to deny him the tragedy that is his, and is his authentic legacy, in which the entire Western world has been reflected without recognizing it. He seeks to destroy Christ and to that end does not even spare him insults and abuse, which comes out into the open in the preparatory notes for *The Antichrist,* especially in the draft version of chapter 29 where, with mental breakdown looming over him, he attempts to pass his own failing

intellect onto the nosological, that is to say, genealogically unmasked, *typus* of Jesus:

> The "Jesus" type
>
> Jesus is the exact *opposite of a hero:* he is an *idiot* [Idiot]. One senses his inability to understand reality: his mind revolves around five or six concepts he first heard and then gradually understood (i.e., wrongly)—in them he has his experience, his world, his truth—the rest is foreign to him. . . . That the real virile instincts [*Manns-Instinkte*]—not only sexual but also the fighting spirit, self-esteem, and heroism—never matured in him, that he was retarded [*zurückgeblieben*], and remained childishly at the age of puberty: these features belong to the type of certain epileptoid neuroses. . . .
>
> One senses, moreover, his inability to understand anything intellectual [*Geistiges*]: on his lips the word "spirit" becomes ambiguous. Not even the faintest hint of science, good taste, mental discipline, and logic touched this holy idiot [*heiligen Idioten*]: no more than life itself touched him. . . . We must never forget it: he is an *idiot* [Idiot] in the midst of a very judicious people. . . . But his disciples were not idiots—Paul was by no means an idiot [*kein Idiot*]. The history of Christianity derives from all that.[10]

In the final text this mocking invective is muted—partly directed at Renan, who is made much use of by Nietzsche (as an alternative to Strauss) and dismissed as a "clown [*Hanswurst*] *in psychologicis*" (that is, incapable of any genealogy)[11]—and concentrated into a single comment with a sarcastically medical ring to it when Nietzsche says it is impossible to apply the *Cultur-Begriff,* the "cultural concept" (in the sense of *Kultur*) of *Geist,* spirit, to the sphere in which Jesus moved; and, as for Jesus himself, it is not even remotely possible to talk of genius: "Speaking with the strict precision of a physiologist, a very different word might occur to fit the case, the word: idiot."[12] It is easy to divine the reasons for this attenuation, exchanging the onslaught of abuse in the earlier note for more tentatively expressed scientific terminology. Nietzsche has no desire to venture onto psychiatric terrain he senses to be extremely slippery, nor does he intend (unlike Celsus) to favor the cross with shameless insults as in the scene at Golgotha, thereby making

Christ the victim that he does not want him to appear to be. But that means that their two positions, the philosopher on the verge of dementia and the prophetic *typus* who is constantly described as demented in the preparatory draft, are already beginning to converge, in a desperately denied description of himself; the note about Jesus as a pathological type now appears as a tragic battlefield, sweeping away any traces of vulgarity that allow it to be dismissed automatically after the fashion of the churchgoers in aphorism 125. Scandalized believers should remember that Christ is objectively closer to those who insult him than to those who think they possess him as a prerequisite taken for granted, since in the case of the former he is at least on the cross and being crucified. But that detracts not at all from the violence and the seriousness of the abuse, displayed in all its virulence and hurtful intent by a text written in one go. To seize on the reference to Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel *The Idiot,* as so many have, in an attempt to idealize this awesome attack,[13] signifies a failure to understand that Nietzsche uses literary allusion in a very skillful way, as we shall see, and it also signifies a belief that cultural stratification, its *Cultur-Begriff* to use Nietzsche's term, prevents the insult from meaning what it says.

This all shows the clear-sightedness of the textual strategy in the printed version; Nietzsche's calculated aim is to combine a picture of Jesus as a childish, provocative announcer of the Kingdom of God, a picture drawn word for word from Renan and Leo Tolstoy, with the final humiliating defeat of the prophet who is as much irresponsible as misunderstood by his followers, and to leave the de facto confutation of this hebephrenic Son of man to the Crucifixion itself. Thus, by implication, all the intellectual strictures of the Nietzschean superman were to fall on this blatantly mentally retarded figure, but it is symptomatic that Nietzsche reserves intelligence for the disciples in the note, especially for St. Paul, and they become the constant target for his hatred and scorn in the text's Wagnerian-like crescendo. This intelligence fluctuates too wildly to settle on one person and allow that person to shift the label of patent dementia onto his enemies. The idiocy attributed to Jesus looms back and forth in *The Antichrist* as a sword of Damocles: after openly declaring that the only proper epithet for Jesus is "idiot" and that his was a case of "'childish' idiocy" ("kindliches" Idiotenthum),[14] Nietzsche attributes him "*the pure folly*" (*die reine Thorheit*), recalling Wagner's Christian hero Parsifal, and defines him a "great symbolist" (*grossen Symbolisten*), opposing

his teaching to Paul's *Dysangelium* (bad news) and Paul's followers labeled as *Idioten.*[15] The underlying web of references and quotations is impressive and apparently gives substance to the attempts to attenuate the abuses against Christ: the pure folly intentionally recalls the hero of the most hated and secretly loved among Wagner's operas, *Parsifal;* and, as already said, Christ as idiot indirectly quotes Dostoevsky's novel *The Idiot* and its Christlike protagonist, the prince Myshkin. But any attempt to soften these incandescent pages is pointless: the double reading of the psychiatric insults expresses Nietzsche's desperate attempt to lay his impending folly on his enemies leaving open the possibility of a more flattening artistic alternative. The upcoming insanity continues to circulate through Nietzsche's last texts and destabilizes them, exercising its pernicious influence on the reviler himself so that at a certain point he breaks the multiple levels of reading skillfully maintained in *The Antichrist* and returns to a last attempt to make the psychiatric diagnosis absolute and definitive.

That moment arrived at the end of December 1888 in the notes for a proclamation against Germany he was working on at the time.[16] In a supreme effort at exorcism the by now half-mad philosopher turned once again to the two extremes he had endeavored to keep apart, verbally and symbolically, until then: the prophetic idiocy of Jesus and his just punishment at the hands of the *imperium Romanum.* After describing the Germans as idiots ("the—lowest, most stupid and vulgar race in existence today") and singling out Bismarck in particular, Nietzsche comes out with his final insult directed at Christ, a blasphemy sounding oddly theological. But it remains oddly suspended in midair: "The idiot on the cross [*Der Idiot am Kreuze*] was. . . ."[17] The phrase is incomplete and indicates Nietzsche's inability to close the circle within the written text, to maintain sufficient control over the text to be able to direct and use it like a weapon. In fact, he *is* closing the circle, but he is closing it on himself as a madly Dionysian vortex, with the cross at its fatal center exerting a relentless gravitational force. The place on the cross remains vacant, and the phrase that would nail the divine idiot there once and for all only emphasizes the attraction of a vacuum to be filled and hastens its being filled by the individual who less than anyone else would wish it. The ellipsis silently indicates the writer himself as the imminent *Idiot am Kreuze,* vainly hiding behind a verb in the past tense and the third person. The trajectory dragging the aspiring Antichrist onto the cross of Christ is now clearly

established, and we can identify the driving force behind it, which is strictly of its time, as befits a prophet.

It becomes increasingly evident from the texts and testimonies that while insulting the cross, and because he insults it, Nietzsche is obsessed and absorbed by it to a point where he can no longer see himself apart from it but must ascend, or collapse, onto it. It is not the psychiatric contradiction that should claim our attention now but the historical contradiction in Nietzsche's last years, dazzlingly obvious but blissfully ignored by his admirers and detractors alike. Nothing in his attitude could be further from the spontaneous attitude of the world dominators who used crucifixion to confirm their *imperium.* In the eyes of an ancient Roman—and we may assume Plato's attitude would not have been wholly different—crucifixion was the outward sign of the worthlessness of the individual nailed to the cross, as emerges unmistakably from Celsus's invectives. Not that Roman crucifixion was regarded with contempt; it simply originated in contempt, which it symbolized and illustrated when it was performed. The opposite is true of Nietzsche: he wants to show his contempt for the cross and teach others to do the same, but in that way he shows that contempt is no longer to be read in the cross, that the world to which he belongs and of which he is an advanced representative now "knows" that its contempt is properly reserved for the crucifiers who nail a man to a cross, not for the crucified. The quotation marks around the verb "knows" are obviously required since certain knowledge resides in things themselves, with no need for representational or categorial confirmation, as the announcer of the death of God to the crowd in the marketplace well knew—without quotation marks this time. The market crowd achieved a massive albeit illusory triumph that was hardly surprising given its expertise in surveys and marketing strategies, usually abetted by the academic world as a somewhat equivocal scholarly arm. With the added contribution of an ancient specialty, posthumous sanctification, it took only a few years to arrive at the all-purpose fairy tale of the death of God as simply the disappearance of God.

The path followed by our aspiring Antichrist is quite another matter. Intent on becoming an anti–crucified Christ, he is for that very reason fated to coincide with the crucified Christ he reproduced in opposing him. In *Der Antichrist* Nietzsche aims to demystify the cross by using the technique of his genealogy, which reveals the obscure will to power of the weak who

unite to prevail over the strong and thereby subvert the laws of history and nature:

> The fate of the Gospel was decided by death—he hung on the "cross." . . . Only death, this unexpected and ignominious death, only crucifixion, generally reserved exclusively for the rabble—only this atrocious paradox [*schauerlichste Paradoxie*] brought the disciples face to face with the real enigma: "*who was he? what did it all mean?*"—Deeply hurt and shaken to the core, with a suspicion that such a death might *confute* his cause [*Sache*], and with the tremendous question mark: "why in that way?"—this state of mind is only too easy to understand.[18]

The genealogical psychology explained in the preceding chapters reaches a peak when it touches on the cross but comes to a halt on this watershed that overturns and reverses his earlier distinctions, and indicates the "staurological" center of gravity around which his mind now revolves in its ravings. Revising and updating Celsus's arguments, the confuter of Christianity attributes the entire doctrine of the cross to the disciples' overexcited imagination when still consternated at their loss; in that way the psychiatric diagnosis previously reserved for their master is passed on to them. In their eagerness to convert a disastrous defeat into an indictment of the Jewish leaders, they set about transforming it into a delirious proclamation of victory,[19] and the height of their delirium was to justify this "unexpected and shameful death" theologically by turning it into an atoning sacrifice:

> To this the disturbed minds [*die gestörte Vernunft*] of this small community [*kleinen Gemeinschaft*] came up with an answer of really frightening absurdity: God gave his son for the remission of sins, as a victim [*Opfer*]. Out of the blue, the end of the Gospel! An *atoning sacrifice* [Schuldopfer], and in its most repugnant and barbarous form, too, the sacrifice of the *innocent* [*das Opfer des* Unschuldigen] for the sins of the wicked! What horrific paganism![20]

Exuberantly driving home his final thrust, Nietzsche is ensnared by the cross he had attempted to use against Christ before and now wields against the Christians; this double objective turns all his accusatory distinctions into

so many paradoxes, into double-binding oscillations destined all too soon to fall on himself, the sole point of convergence and implosive solution. The ever-widening oscillation about who deserves to be called a psychiatric madman or a possessor of the *Geist* refracts on the fundamental lines of Nietzsche's thinking, exposing the inherent conflicts, the pain, and the torment. His charge against the disciples is easily shown to be strictly contradictory; he attacks their *kleine Gemeinschaft* for applying to Jesus the same logic of substitution and salvation that he praises elsewhere in relation to Dionysus. The argument is similar to the one for the will to power: just as the priests and their acolytes use the lie of herd morality to effectuate a will to power they could not openly impose in other ways, in the face of the natural selection of the fittest, so the first disciples, bewildered by their master's crucifixion, turned to the idea of atonement to explain his death and console themselves. But since this idea was completely excluded by his puerile and amential teaching, what they obtained was a theological monstrosity: the Father's offering of the Son in sacrifice, an act that fills Nietzsche with indignation, and we can understand why if we go back to the very early years of his life. The pyroclastic phenomenology of his last years is the product of a much older magmatic chamber, a personal noumenon that, once identified, is perfectly recognizable in the final volcanic phenomena, because they are linked to the initial phenomena by the same chemistry, boosted to an incredible degree by the huge forces that sparked it off.

The specter of dementia, the *folie circulaire* of the manic-depressive syndrome and of the Eternal Return, haunts Nietzsche's theological-genealogical reconstruction in which he relives the trauma of his father's death from "softening of the brain" (probably a brain tumor). As a child Nietzsche experienced this death as a terrible punishment inflicted on him by his father, and in his early autobiographical writings the figure of the pious Lutheran pastor can be seen to resemble the Christian God.[21] In one of his attempts at autobiography he describes a distressing nightmare experienced shortly afterward in which he had a premonition of the death of his younger brother, dragged down into the grave by his father's ghost;[22] this ominous forecast sounds like a substitute for Nietzsche's own death, a sentence of death temporarily suspended but inevitable in the end since as the surviving son he proves to be guilty twice over. Here once more is the tormented atmosphere surrounding the announcement of the death of God, the same atmosphere

that surrounds Freud's reconstruction of the Son sacrificed on the cross to compensate for the primordial killing of the father perpetrated in the far distant past. It would be a gross error to consider these impressive scenarios as simple psychic projections of childhood traumas. The route unconsciously taken by Nietzsche and less unconsciously by Freud is exactly the opposite and consisted in recognizing in traumatic experiences of this type the structure of more ancient experiences, at the origin of our human psyche. The magmatic chamber of the volcano points toward origins lying still deeper, to colossal lava vents that rise from the earth's core, from the subterranean source of the surface world.

The close association of all these individual and collective imaginings with the father figure corresponds to these geological and cosmic causes. The psychological background to these experiences was far from psychologistic since in great figures, such as Nietzsche and Freud—and Bataille might easily be numbered with them—the difficult relationship with the father, or the lack of one, came to represent the crisis of the objectual mediation that the father traditionally embodied. From this viewpoint the death of God is to be interpreted as the death of the Mediation, of the Mediator, marking modern man indelibly, condemning him to seek anything to replace it, even the most grotesque *Ersatz* or surrogate, as we shall see when we analyze the phenomena of totalitarianism. Further signs of the serious nature of the death of the paternal Mediator are the decline in the male/female complementarity that was once the secret of the world and, more generally, the loss of human objectuality, symbolic and physical at one and the same time, of which the mass exterminations of the twentieth century were to be a consequence.[23] This objectuality, psychic, physical, and even sexual, was cruelly denied to Nietzsche all his life, but his personal experience thereby becomes a unique opportunity for us to observe what was seething below the surface of old Europe, a sort of supervolcano whose eventual eruption was to send shockwaves throughout the world. When Nietzsche, in *The Antichrist,* exclaims in horror at the Son being crucified by will of the Father, he is defending himself against the monstrous destiny he felt breathing down his neck and that his mind refashioned, in a desperately ingenious bid to counterattack, as a historical-religious refutation. The immensely profound and contradictory nature of this attempt needs to be examined further and is best treated in a separate section that will take us right to the end of the Nietzschean

trajectory, and also show us the sign that silently indicates a different resource, an unexpected oasis of calm at the center of the convulsions gripping a mind and an age in chaos.

### 3. I am the Christ . . .

We will recapitulate the basic mediatory paradox in Nietzsche's thinking, seeing that the system he has devised, now racing away at full throttle, is also the heuristic and energetic resource that points to the solution in a negative way, certainly; but these negations, asserted to an excruciating degree, finally transmute and become the most unlikely, most consistent affirmation.

In *The Antichrist* the basis for criticizing the demented theology of the first disciples is the typical postulate that we have a positive will to power, the openly expressed will of the stronger members of society favored by nature, and a base, villainous will to power, the will of the weak who, led by the priests, unite to condemn and dominate the strong.[24] In the same way, in terms of ritual, we have an atoning sacrifice that is to be extolled and performed openly, namely the Dionysian sacrifice, and an abnormal, grotesque atoning sacrifice, fruit of the first Christians' concern to refashion as victory their master's decisive defeat, not to mention the defeat of his imaginary, puerile Kingdom of God. And yet, if it is true that the arbitrary nature of the will to dominion, entrusted to the ruthless selection of a *Natur* midway between the pre-Socratic and the Darwinian, only emphasizes the pure logic of abuse of power, it becomes difficult to see why the *Wille zur Macht* of the united weaker elements should alone be cause for horrified disapproval, no less than it becomes obvious that atoning sacrifice, lauded to the skies in ancient cults and in the Superman's futuristic cults, loses none of its features or powers by the mere fact of passing into the Christian cult.

There is a hidden identity running through Nietzsche's contrapositions, and it undermines them and confirms the objectual destruction of a philosophy that has swept aside all practicable mediations, thereby most disconcertingly posing the problem of how a mediation and its object could be recovered. This challenge was later taken up by Bataille; the tragedy is that Nietzsche, unlike the more sensible and virile Bataille, failed to recognize the centrality of the undifferentiated identity from which the mediation emerges

and did not pursue the clues he had himself picked up, the indications disseminated by the Christian mediation in the course of history. In the spring of 1888, not long before *The Antichrist,* Nietzsche came to realize that what underlines the difference between the events surrounding Dionysus and those surrounding Christ is a structural identity that highlights a difference in Christ brought out by the lack of differentiation itself, which also means that it is the structural similarity of the cross to ancient atoning sacrifices that proves its power to redeem, that is, to achieve a new differentiation and objectual salvation. However, the philosopher-Antichrist takes care to keep his distance from this mediatory and ritual corollary, strong in the knowledge of having amputated the two extremes of Dionysus and Christ considered in their historical reality. With good reason he insists on the "sense" (*Sinn*) of their stories,[25] that is, on the interpretive aspect, without pausing to consider the ritual aspect of the ancient *mythoi,* which elsewhere appears to obsess him, and thereby dispenses with the horrific sacrificial realism of the death of God proclaimed in aphorism 125 of *The Gay Science.*

But that is not the end of the parabola of Nietzsche's experience and testimony: indeed he lends it fresh impetus and sends it like an arrow to its ultimate consequences. Fired by his desire to reach an unreachable paternal mediator, this flight of Icarus carves out the wide gulf dividing him from the great majority of his commentators. The two signal exceptions are Bataille and Girard, whose strengths together with their failings indicate the path we must follow if Nietzsche's efforts are not to be deprived of the further elaboration that they tacitly demand.

Bataille takes up the Nietzschean parabola where it left off and continues it to the point of wanting to be sacrificed by his cult companions in *Acéphale,* a secret society that was a crazy, visionary experiment at the end of the 1930s. Unlike Nietzsche, he survived this sacrificial self-offering, both physically and mentally, and came away with the unique testimony of the survivor, with the capacity to transform the self-destructive impulse that had failed, and so had been overcome, into *chance,* that is, into constant readiness for self-sacrifice as the center of one's existence.[26] This was an extraordinary outcome, and is still misunderstood today, although the objectual needs that are the very soul of the mediatory experience and of the cultural systems stemming from it lay over the horizon, beyond the tempestuous seas on which Bataille sailed.

Girard provides a more reassuring interpretation and has no hesitation in recognizing Nietzsche's revelatory, antichristic aims; he sees the place of aphorism 125 as central and above all justifies it with anthropological and religious arguments, systematically misunderstood by philosophical commentators, and not clearly defined by Bataille. Characteristically, however, Girard makes the criteria of the contrast rigidly inflexible and does not explain the inestimably fruitful nature of the indifferentiation that Nietzsche shrewdly exploits, a nature that fully and intimately accords with the mediation of Christ's cross. Instead, everything runs along predetermined lines: Christianity takes in every truth a priori, and every falsehood flows no less a priori into paganism, with Christ's challenger engulfed by its Stygian waters, showing us the wicked being punished according to the most exemplary style. The capacity of Nietzsche's provocative stance as testimony is thus omitted, just as its spectacular reemergence with Bataille is also ignored. A more sympathetic, more attentive examination of Nietzsche's last writings and statements, on the contrary, reveals a livelier, more engaging picture; this reopens the whole question, dispels our false certainties, and replaces them with new and inconceivable ones, which reveal the real threshold of the Christian mediation in the inconceivable.

With the uncontrollable recklessness of his last months of conscious activity, the aspiring Antichrist approaches the nerve center of the question, spurred on by his strategy of exploiting Dionysus's divinizing force, from an apparently safe distance, and adopting a biblical manner to bear witness to it. Thanks to the receptive power of his genius, now on the verge of collapse, the question is raised once again amid a whole string of *idées fixes* and commonplaces enlisted for the final battle. Gradually as he draws closer to Dionysian madness, it makes him utter words previously unspoken, the hidden truth of the original indifferentiation, of the objectual crisis from which the mediation of the crucified Jesus arose, and rearises definitively. Very much more than a question of theory, this is reality, lived experience: the Christian sacrifice must in fact be performed in one's own life, as John reminds us. And Nietzsche, for all his contorted way of proceeding, cannot escape that fact.

After vehemently attacking St. Paul in *The Antichrist,* whom he calls, in an apotropaic reversal of the hymn to love in 1 Corinthians, "the genius in hatred, in the vision of hatred, in the ruthless logic of hatred" because guilty of nailing the Tolstoyan hebephrenic "to *his own* cross" with his *theologia*

*crucis,*[27] Nietzsche launches out against all Christians without exception, since each shares the idiotism already attributed to their master, which gives the lie once and for all to those well-meaning attempts to soften his words. Hatred of the cross begins to emerge as the spur to a final reckoning no longer to be put off:[28]

> *God on the Cross*—will we go on not understanding the ghastly world of ideas hidden behind this symbol?—Everything suffers, everything hangs on the cross, is divine. . . . We are [*Wir Alle*] all hanging on the cross, therefore *we* are divine. . . . We alone [*Wir allein*] are divine. . . . Christianity was a victory, it was the cause [*Grunde*] of a *nobler* mentality perishing, Christianity has been humanity's greatest misfortune [*Unglück*] up till now.[29]

Even when so furiously roused and agitated, Nietzsche loses none of his brilliance, evident from the care taken over style in this passage, and intuits the boundless transitivity toward the divine mediation that the cross opens up to all humanity, to all creatures: "Everything suffers, everything hangs on the cross, is divine." This appears to echo Paul's celebrated words in Romans 8:22 about the "whole creation" that "groans and travails together" (*systenazei kai synodínei*) in expectation of *huiothesia,* of being adopted. The repeated prefix *syn-,* "with," lends the phrase a strong collective connotation, while the meaning of υἱοθεσία extends beyond child adoption in a strictly legal sense; it is complete filiation, a real entering into the Son's mediation through the cross, a mediatory and objectual identification that has *apolytrosis tou somatos hemon* (8:24), the ransoming-redemption of our bodies, as its consequence. Far from thoroughly understanding St. Paul's ideas, Nietzsche nevertheless comes closer in attempting to overthrow them, starting with the *theologia crucis* that he transforms into a crazy projection of the weakest hanging from the cross, and makes no mention of the fact that sooner or later every creature is crucified on the cross of his weakness, of his finite mortal condition. This is a clear indication, both psychiatric and theological, that Nietzsche had an essentially different filiation in mind, his Dionysian divinization through which he was to incarnate the very spirit of sacrifice conceived as the supreme law of Being. Unmindful of the devastating *coincidentia oppositorum* that his plan must entail, a *coincidentia* worlds apart from the ancient *complexio oppositorium* that maintained both the *opposita*

in fruitful, tensional unity, he indulged in the dream of being with the crucifiers, on the side of the supremely powerful and strong.

The "nobler mentality" whose defeat was "humanity's greatest misfortune" is precisely the mentality of those who crucify without the least remorse and attach no importance to this slave's death apart from its confirmation of the universal mediation of the Roman *res publica* and its absolute dominion. Knowing he cannot act the part of a phlegmatic Roman procurator since the "nobler mentality" died out with the Christian "victory," Nietzsche seeks to regain permanent possession of it in unprecedented fashion by staking everything on his own transvaluation of all values: through the sacrificial act, through consciously killing God, the Superman will divinize himself and attain the Eternal Return. If we are to understand what was happening here, and what was to happen in the next century, we must not confuse Nietzsche's aim with a banal nostalgia for sacrifice; that, in its absurdity, would make his position simply ridiculous and/or really criminal, albeit on a purely verbal level, and it would prevent us from seeing and explaining its prophetic value. He was not aiming at a return to historical forms since by themselves, detached from their empowering nexus, they are meaningless; instead, his goal was to take over the law of sacrifice and the divine. The real outcome of man's self-divinization as proclaimed in the aphorism about the death of God is his union with the law of Order eternally reborn from Disorder, with the law of the divine Object forever rising again from its destruction, the Eternal Return of the Identical.

The transition intuited and experienced by Nietzsche is enormously important if we are to understand the workings of totalitarianism in our own time. He had perceived an epoch-making shift, consciously registered by Europe's leading culture, consisting essentially in the disappearance of every shared mediation, every credible objectual reality, with man's self-divinization as the last resort for bringing a new world out of the breakup of the world. Any attempt to blame Nietzsche and his proclamations for what was done at a later date, especially by the totalitarian regime of National Socialism, therefore mistakes the seismograph for the earthquake and puts the blame for the disaster on the recorder of the disaster; this kind of accusation is simply the reverse of the out-and-out justificationism of his most uncritical admirers. Seismographers are human beings, of course, and can either denounce the ills they foresee, as the Bible prophets did and as Dostoevsky attempted to do in

nineteenth-century Russia, or else they can connive in spirit at those ills, as may fairly be said of Nietzsche. In his defense, however, it must be said that no liability exists for other people's actions in a noncalculable future, and also that there is value in the profound meaning of statements coming from a prophet who shares in the ills that he announces. The prophetic nature of Nietzsche's utterances derives from the fact that the prophet himself suffered the same fate as his words, a destiny of self-defeat presenting us yet again with the indissoluble bond between suffering and knowledge that results from the genetic link between knowledge of the object and its destruction, a bond that grows and intensifies in Nietzsche until it transforms into atonement. This amounts to saying that Nietzsche comes to know God because he fails to become God, having attempted to kill him. As a result, he mentally kills himself and relives in his mind the double bind of the sacrificial mediation that makes a god of someone who was not god, causes someone to be who is not, causes someone not to be who is, to paraphrase one of Heraclitus's most outstanding fragments on the metamorphoses of sacrificial origin: "Immortals mortals, mortals immortals."[30] In this way the reviler of Christ was to become the person that he was not, and neither wished nor thought to be.

Premonitory signs of this metamorphosis are not lacking in the course of *The Antichrist*. Nietzsche declares in chapter 39 that "after all [*im Grunde*] there has been only one Christian, and he died on the cross,"[31] and a revealing phrase in chapter 46 reports the further step: "The 'first Christian'—and, I'm afraid, the 'last Christian' as well, whom perhaps I'm going to know."[32] This impressively anticipates the final result, but Nietzsche's fight is still building to its climax, still holding to an intermediate stage, namely his previous identification with the sacrificial victim, with Dionysus crucified. This presents itself in a passage that has been passed over in silence by all Nietzsche's commentators, though it represents an emotional and stylistic climax, majestic and shattering in its obviousness. It is here that Nietzsche makes his supreme effort to destroy the "conviction of all the idiots" (that is, of all Christians) that martyrdom bears witness to the truth:

> The stupidity of all persecutors throughout history [*die welt-historische Dummheit*] was precisely this, that is, making the opposing cause appear honorable, giving it the appeal of martyrdom. . . . Still today, a woman will kneel before an error [*Irrthum*] because she has been told someone died on

> the cross for it. *Is the cross an argument then?*—But about all these things one voice alone has spoken the word, the need for which had been felt for thousands of years,—*Zarathustra.*[33]

In an attempt to neutralize the significance of the cross, Nietzsche denies all value to the blood of the martyrs, and yet, when he asserts the necessity of not allowing the martyrs to "appear honorable" through the "appeal" of their martyrdom, he is unconsciously furnishing indirect proof of that value, since no executioner in antiquity would ever have regarded his victims' sufferings as appealing and honorable. Nor is there any sign of the schizophrenic Superman here, capable of mixing Dionysian euphoria with a sense of pity for whoever has to pay the price, unless it should be the executioner who becomes the victim, earning our pity when, Dionysus-like, he proclaims his own divinity. In an effort to escape from the grip of the forces he is defying, Nietzsche shifts to a purely logical-discursive plane ("error [*Irrthum* in German, with a connotation of mental derangement] . . . she has been told . . . *Is the cross an argument then?*"), but every distinction collapses in the face of an argument that coincides with what is being argued and is confirmed by virtue of itself, of its mere production. "Is the cross an argument then?": this phrase seems to sound a note of finality, the question turning into a de facto affirmation represented by Nietzsche himself, abandoned to himself and drifting like a wandering Jew from one desolate, bourgeois vacation resort to another until finally, roaming the streets of Turin, he imagines himself being torn limb from limb like Dionysus,[34] and in a sudden burst of pity, he attempts to embrace a horse being whipped by a coachman.[35] Nietzsche has no idea how to defend himself from a besetting truth and is poised to give himself up to the theory of self-divinization that would trigger the final crucifixion. Against the word of Christ he sets his own word, in a megalomaniacal crescendo that justifies the inference that it indicates his deteriorating state of mind, culminating in complete mental breakdown a few months later. Here, then, is the counterword that he introduces immediately afterward, with the stylistic clarity that was his to the end, a passage from his anti-Bible, *Thus Spake Zarathustra,* from the chapter titled "Of Priests" to be exact:

> They wrote signs of blood [*Blutzeichen*] along the way [*Weg*], and their stupidity taught that the truth would be demonstrated with blood.

> But blood is the worst testimony to truth; blood poisons even the purest doctrine and transforms it into delirium and hatred of hearts.
>
> And if you go through fire for your doctrine—whatever does that prove! It is a greater thing if the doctrine comes from being burnt at the stake yourself.[36]

The passage taken from *Zarathustra* is resemantized and reinforced, in a way relevant to revealing the artful subtleties that underlie a work intended to supplant the Bible. Reduced to a pseudo-argumentative epiphenomenon, the Christian word persists in metamorphosing in alarming forms, in "signs of blood" written by the martyrs "along the way" that threaten to infect anyone who exposes them. Nietzsche seeks purity to wipe away these stubborn signs, a purity re-creating the purity of ancient sacrifices, in a way that can only be self-fulfilling, self-sacrificing. From the rabble's sacrifice written in blood he passes to the palingenetic, purifying sacrifice of fire, to throw himself into the flames, opposing the Christian blood with a neopagan ousting of the Word that manifested itself by accepting death on the cross. But Nietzsche lived in the mediatory desert of modernity, which he had divined and sensed to be none other at the time, and had not allowed for the mediatory power of Christ's cross that includes opposition, not to flatten it and make it like itself but because it thrives on the most strenuous opposition enabling it to complete its mediation. In that way, Nietzsche's assertion of the Dionysian mediation only confirms Christ's mediation, while the rhetorical contrivances of *Zarathustra* are brought to performative fulfillment. He aimed to demolish the cross but instead nails himself to it and so gives existential, ostensive proof of it, by surrendering mind and body to the ghosts that haunt him and show themselves to be more real than any directly observable reality.

Seeking to rediscover the divine sacrificial mediation, Nietzsche applies his theory with insane metaconsistency. In his eyes there is only one alternative left, in the modern mediatory and objectual disintegration, and that is to bring objectual destruction and divine transfiguration together in the very person who benefits from them through an act of self-sacrifice, which is supposed to set the divinizing and divinized supermankind within the universal circuit of the Eternal Return but ends up as a final *sacrificium intellectus.* In this implosion the causes establishing the world become one with the causes

destroying every possible object, in order to leave no residual doubt or failure, and this *coincidentia oppositorum* comes to coincide with insanity, which was Nietzsche's real self-sacrifice. It is not a question of explaining his mental collapse by some theory about the punishment of the wicked, and so to reiterate the chorus's view of the death of Pentheus in the *Bacchae;* our task is to describe how a great thinker interpreted his own destiny right to the very end, a strictly logical interpretation, but misunderstood and unheeded by those who were to make a fetish of it. Here once again is the redemptive, sanctifying acceptance of Damiens and of Mora and Piazza, in a distorted version that would wish to deny it but for that very reason fails to destroy its power to save, to bring knowledge and objectual redemption. In the end Nietzsche wanted to die in the same way as the Christ he had abused, thus fulfilling his destiny as a loser in a way that is alarmingly amenable to be caricatured with a single cognitively seductive image serviceable to those who light upon it to attack the cross, a delusion equally shared by those who think conversely they can find shelter behind the announcement of the death of God, and who, in so doing, fulfill the prophecy of the churches being turned into the graves and tombs of God.

From this we can conclude that nobody offers a more tragic and eloquent testimony to the significance and inevitability of Christ's cross than Nietzsche, who comes to identify with it totally. Attempts have been made in various ways to show that the crucified figure with whom he identified when signing his letters in his madness was not Christ but a manifestation of Dionysus; and undoubtedly Dionysus was one extreme of the oscillation, but only one of the two extremes, opposed to and increasingly superimposed on the antipodean Christic extreme, according to the note written in the spring of 1888. The truth is that the idea that the two crucifixions, the lynching on Mount Cithaeron and Christ's crucifixion on the hill of Golgotha, are originally *identical* enters and fixes itself in Nietzsche's mind through the final manifestation of *Dionysus patibilis;* this is evident from the unequivocally Christic reference in "*The* Crucified one," as well as expressions such as his having "put Caiaphas in chains" (letter to Burckhardt, January 6, 1889),[37] but the most sensational confirmation is found in a note sent to the French journalist Jean Bourdeau in early January 1889. This note, originally written in Italian, has been lost, but it can be reconstructed working back from the remaining testimonies in French: "I am the Christ, Christ in person, Christ

crucified":[38] an almost Trinitarian formulation, since the figure of Christ is presented in three stages of increasing manifestation, up to the final, definitive stage, which is now the only one that Nietzsche has in mind.

The philosopher who announced the death of God carries it out in his own person. In spite of the countless studies made of Nietzsche, this fact is still far from being understood. A deafening silence matches the silence of the incredulous people in aphorism 125 and is the sign that a new age begins with him, the age of the death of God, of his killing, and the rebirth of the divine from that killing, either in the form of a barbaric revival of the divinizing ecstasy at the origin of mankind or as an experience of God capable of including its own history and historicity. The philosopher of the death of God became himself a living cross, introducing a period in history in which the profound meaning of the cross would no longer be linked to visible, institutional, and denominational crosses but to the experience of the cross in the lives of anonymous masses of people, of entire nations. We must now return to consider the preapocalyptic scenarios of Europe on the eve of the First World War, and so bring our survey of the Christian mediation and its influence on history to a temporary conclusion.

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The parabola traced by Nietzsche is completely representative (with all the wealth of meaning and ambiguity of the act of re-presenting) of the dissociated but revealing relationship of the contemporary world to the Christian mediation and to the cross, its historical, performative epitome. The announcement of the death of God announces an event as old as humanity itself; at the same time, it is an unheard-of event (that is to say, not yet heard) that its prophet sought to ward off in order to pursue the circuitous route that would inevitably take him there. We can infer the momentous nature of Nietzsche's role in sensing and transmitting the real import of this issue from the fact that it is not reducible to any of the hermeneutic schemes that have attempted to tie it down, starting with his sister's pan-Germanic ideology, followed by Nazism, down to the metaphysical straitjacket stitched onto it by Heidegger and opposite attempts of an antimetaphysical and postmodern kind. The question of the relationship to Nazism must be allowed prominence, not to sanction any political, metaphysical, or Christian indictment but in order to understand more exactly what Nietzsche intuited and foresaw

of the spirit of the coming age, the age in which we live. The era of the death of God began with a series of unprecedented social and political catastrophes that Nazism has come to symbolize, but it is certainly not alone. This is the real *crux* of our time, and any talk of the cross of Christ today has meaning only in relation to this historical and interpretative *crux;* in other words, either the cross of Christ can provide an answer to the disasters of our age, or its message must be considered lost and consigned to the archive like so many other messages in our crowded past.

Twentieth-century history, springing from two world wars and various totalitarian regimes, is a staurological and eschatological history without parallel; for that very reason, however, we must stop judging it by prepackaged ideological criteria, as if it were a question of establishing guilt at some imaginary cultural Nuremberg. The absurdity of such a pretension is apparent as soon as we remember that sitting among the judges and victors (a hendiadys whose terms are virtually synonymous) at Nuremberg was the century's most horrific totalitarian regime, not excluding Nazism itself; indeed, it provided the Nazis with a practical model of a mass regime whose strength lay in annihilating all its enemies, a course of destruction that came to involve entire sections of the population, millions and millions of people. This in no way mitigates the horrors of Nazism but places them in the real historical sequence and so explains them; the ideology of National Socialism (that is, socialism applied to the principle of *Deutschland* über *Alles in die Welt*) is clearly the extremization of violent revolution as theorized by Vladimir Lenin and carried out by Joseph Stalin with his socialism in one country.[39] These are the phenomena that crucified the entire world, and the idea of humanity itself, and we are still a long, long way from being rid of them.

Anyone who thinks we put totalitarianism behind us with the allied victory in the Second World War is suffering under a delusion. The seriousness of the totalitarian phenomenon can be gauged by the fact that at Nuremberg one totalitarian regime passed judgment on another, passing itself off as a force for Good, with the inevitable political approval of the only other real winner in the global conflict. We must deduce from this that in our age, which holds itself to be superior to all others in ethical sensitivity and political democracy, the most oppressive and exterminatory type of political regime receives the world's plaudits when it wins a world war. Nothing so

much as contemporary history, with its savagery disguised as ideology and morality, confirms John's assertion that the peace such as Christ gives has nothing to do with the peace given by the world. The real heir to Nietzsche's prophecy, the only person to relive it and perceive its cognitive importance, was Bataille, the defeated Bataille who in his anguish could undergo the mystical experience of the torture of a thousand cuts, not the Bataille who felt obliged to cite the production needs of mass industrialization in order to justify Stalin and pander to the communist Left.[40]

This certainly does not mean that there are no aberrant aspects to Nietzsche's thinking; these gradually increased as he struggled to overcome his insoluble dilemmas and protective megalomania. Seen in their proper historical context, however, they reveal a side of Nietzsche far more topical than he cared to think. Forces were at work far more powerful than any one thinker—albeit a genius—destructive, disintegrating forces that Nietzsche had prophesied and Dostoevsky had already recognized in Russia a few years before: the peripheral position and extreme conditions of his country made it ideal for observing what was coming to the boil in the hell's kitchen of history, a history by now embraced the whole world unbeknownst to the players. We will understand something of these huge historical currents only if we distinguish them from what is only borne along on the surface and indicates only their speed and direction; we can then take our soundings according to their strength and depth.

Even only from the outside, from its materially visible side, the cross proves to be a suitable interpretive key for this. In fact, the Nazi swastika can very easily be seen as a diabolical caricature of the Christian cross, an obscure pagan inversion in which the *Führer* is worshipped as the Messiah, a Dionysian Messiah who instead of atoning for everybody has everybody atone for him; and the same argument holds good for the hammer and sickle, paraded as the symbol of salvation for the oppressed, exploited proletariat under the loving guidance of their mustachioed Little Father. These mass deceptions are now apparent to all for what they were, though it must be said that other, more modern frauds deceive the masses today, confirming Origen's assertion that the devil himself "with his principalities and powers" has been nailed to the cross and shown up for what he is,[41] though the recurrence, diversity, and exponential creativeness of it all would have left the Alexandrian Father speechless. However, these contrapositions are not enough; they remain

moralistic and consolatory nowadays because we no longer possess cosmological and intermedial theologies that explain everything on the basis of a predefined system (we should not forget, besides, that Origen had the idea of apocatastasis to absolve his thinking of judgmental moralism). We need to look deeper, or rather in a different, informed way, and not make a banner of the cross to flourish in fanciful battles but use it as a hermeneutic criterion for delving into the details of a horrifying human history that is no one else's but our own.

## 4. The Totalitarian Anticrosses

Any analysis of totalitarianism neglecting an overview of the paradoxical sequence of historical events that led up to it proves utterly worthless. Hannah Arendt, in what is the most thorough, impassioned, and enthralling study of the subject so far, takes this correct contextual approach.[42] Nevertheless, her study remains incomplete and oversimplified in several places, ignoring the long religious history of mankind that lies behind these typically modern phenomena; and it deals inadequately with two essential steps: the catastrophe of the First World War and the Russian Revolution sparked off by the war. Some reference to these events will serve to clarify the historical-cultural situation in which we find ourselves—that is to say, the state of permanent mediatory and objectual crisis underlying the world today. This situation calls for urgent reflection to acquire elements to understand the present and the future of the Christian mediation, and of our globalized world now firmly in the grip of what might well be called "globalitarianism," which was Thomas Mann's real worry when he attempted to defend *Kultur,* without realizing, however, that to mistake this principle for what it represented for German *Kultur* historically would only make matters worse, by providing further lies for propaganda and fresh pretexts for extermination.

And what bearing the cross has on the European apocalypse beginning in 1914 is visualized for us in the photograph that concludes *The Last Days of Mankind,* the drama by Karl Kraus about the First World War, which depicts the grotesque consequences of the carnage, which were already directly apparent in the loss of any objectual meaning in language and the collapse of every authentically meaningful dimension. The photograph shows a

wayside shrine struck by a shell on which a crucifix stands out against a grey, devastated landscape. The wooden cross has been destroyed, Christ's body alone remains, his arms stretching upward in a gesture that might be seen as surrender or resurrection, or both. And it symbolizes the real cross of our times, reduced to invisibility and leaving in its place defenseless bodies whose gesture of entreaty exists in a void.

The Great War is a quintessentially Nietzschean moment but goes in the opposite direction to what Nietzsche had been heartily recommending, seeing that it caused an uncontrollable explosion in the will to power of European nation-states, and of their mythologies or rather para-mythologies for propaganda purposes at the service of carefully concealed economic and social interests. Nietzsche's final utterances against Germany and the Hohenzollerns, for all their ravings, correspond to his uneasiness about this; he was concerned not to leave the trump card of divine destruction in the hands of shady businessmen, corrupt politicians, and masses doped on lies. Which is exactly what took place in the summer of 1914, with consequences still far from being fully grasped more than a century later, by a world dominated by similar forces multiplied a thousandfold. Likewise, it is striking to observe, and it confirms Nietzsche's prophetic role, how many European intellectuals were seized by an authentic Dionysian frenzy in 1914, bubbling over with enthusiasm or overawed in a way that can only be called religious, at the prospect of violence being unleashed on a scale unimaginable before mass industrial production.

This is not a case of commonplace fanatical nationalism belonging to another age, and something we have now put behind us. Clearly, anyone content with such pseudo-historical fantasies cannot even imagine what men might be capable of in the future, when the lives of billions of their fellow human beings could be threatened or destroyed by enormous natural, military, and environmental disasters. As the prospect of such tremendous devastation began to unfold, a religious history, superficially regarded as dead and buried, would come back in for instructive, and destructive, reexamination; and anyone possessing the technology to deal with the consequences of global catastrophe would appear as the divine being Nietzsche wished to be in his own eyes and in the eyes of others. But then there would have to be another God to guard against the cultural, moral, and political consequences of the favors done by such gods, and we must not forget that Nietzsche was

looking to an unidentified God, not artificial entities created by the sinister cult of pure Power. Nor must we forget that the intellectuals who let themselves be carried away on the tide of mass fascination with the war were also looking toward this unidentified God, such figures as Thomas Mann and Ernst Jünger in Germany, Charles Péguy in France, and Gabriele D'Annunzio in Italy. The inferno of the First World War tells us about our future, not our past, and somewhat depressingly of our present when we reflect that the intellectual giants of that time have none to rival them today. But how did a disaster of such colossal proportions come about? Why did it set its seal on the history of the Christianized West, bequeathing a legacy to the entire world that appears so extremely distressing once we start to reflect about it fully consciously? And if that is the final assessment of western Europe's history, in what exactly does its peculiarly Christian heritage consist?

First of all, we must understand clearly that the influence of Western Christianity in the catastrophes of modern history has been indirect and has acted above all negatively, that is, by way of the crisis and the denial of the mediations put forward by Christianity in its Western Catholic form. In the fourteenth century Dante wrote the *Divine Comedy* in an effort to bolster the universal mediations of church and empire; but the state of crisis was to deepen further, and with the establishment of the para-imperial mediations of national states and the religious and cultural earthquake of the Reformation,[43] western Europe entered the modern era. The crisis, however, ought not to surprise overmuch, since the secret of the Christian mediation is that it functions on the basis of the individual's free choice, his willingness to be part of it, fulfilling himself and almost disappearing in doing so, and in taking part each human being becomes his own mediator and the mediator of others because of Christ's mediation. At the same time, the this-worldly commitment of Latin Christianity partly removed this system for salvation from the sphere of futuristic or fulfilled eschatology found in the early texts and developed in resurrectional terms in Eastern Christianity. Over the centuries the Western Christian mediation was to prove extraordinarily productive, and no less open to change, since latent within it is the power to bring about the Christic eschatology in society and history.

I am certainly not suggesting by this that Western Christianity was a distant cause of totalitarianism, but that that cause can be traced to the open rebellion against the Western Christic mediations that injected their

liberating potential into an anthropological and historical dimension increasingly visible and operating on its own. It could be said, without exaggeration, that totalitarianism is the distant result of rejecting the message of universal salvation presented by Dante in his epic poem, a statement that ought to be easily grasped by anyone who has understood my explanations of courtly love and the Christian idea of the Last Judgment. This immanentization of the Christic mediation, accompanied by a fundamental misunderstanding of it, was bound to come to the surface in the rapid exchanges of contemporary political ideologies that came to their first great mediatory conflagration in the French Revolution. From then on European history has seen a series of upheavals and massacres on an ever larger scale while, running in parallel, culture and science have flourished as never before. And we must not forget that we owe the coordinates of today's world to the discoveries made in those years, as well as the possibility of even conceiving of what I am now writing. Without Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God taken up by Bataille, or the hypothesis about mankind's origin that Freud derived from it and Girard further developed, the present text could hardly have been formulated.

And so we can adequately explain Hannah Arendt's acute analysis of the inconsistencies in the nation-state, an internal crisis within the modern state that is the real institutional and ideological *crux* conditioning and characterizing European history, as a decisive factor behind the rise of totalitarianism. Europe's nation-states indeed found themselves caught in a contradictory position: while as states they were putting forward a universal, absolute mediation that came from the medieval church and empire, as nations they remained within irremediably narrow territorial and economic limits that they expected to defend by ethnic-type operations or paltry expansionism.[44] The contradiction might actually have been concealed by propagandistic formulas, disguising inordinate ambitions by an appeal to some high universalistic pretension; but the dynamism generated on a lower level in European societies meant that any plan devised by the regime was bound to be precarious, while the regime itself if it were to last needed a lasting hierarchic structure, which is the same as saying an incontrovertible social, religious, and political mediation. The powerful, irresistible drive of humankind toward democracy, which Alexis De Tocqueville recognized in the United States of America and in the French Revolution, was the main force behind

modern revolutions, but it was also the precondition for what occurred with the totalitarian regimes whose very structure, based on participation and plebiscites, at once betrays their origin. Nothing could be more dangerous for democracy than to use instruments or impulses proclaimed from the rooftops to be democratic, since the very essence of democracy ought to be the individual's rational consent, going back to the time it was first established in a very limited form in the Greek *polis* and was based on the sacred and horizontal mediation of the *logos.* But in the mass secularization of societies that were once Christian, the rational and cultural instruments had lost their sacredness, causing the further loss of the mediatory assumptions of a democracy genuinely worthy of the name, with incalculable consequences.

The new mass dimension of Western societies demanded huge resources that in turn required means and powers of decision adequate to their scale; and these became the object for the ambitions and greed of those seeking access to them, in the virtual absence of mediatory and objectual factors that might act as a brake, if only symbolically. There was nothing new in man's lust for power, but there was something new in the possibilities opened up by the collapse of all shared mediations, namely, the prospect of immanent exclusivism, total moral impunity, and freedom from sanctions. The need to meet the demands made by the masses tended to become one with the establishment of power-hungry or power-wielding cliques, characteristically formed by accident and opportunity, no longer having links to publicly visible factors of authorization or wealth, and exclusive in nature since the fewer they were the richer were the pickings. As a consequence, democracy became an easily managed means for the exercise of immense power, which was the more undisturbed the less visible it was and the less visible its source. In this way the road to totalitarianism was defined and opened up, among the twists and turns of European history and the internal upheavals that affected every country in Europe large enough not to become automatically the satellite of another.

The prime continental model of the internal contradictions within the modern state-form, with its two-pronged drive toward apparent democracy and essential oligarchy, was provided by monarchic and revolutionary France, gradually extending its influence as the violent tremors it produced confirmed its mediatory but at the same time destabilizing role. That influence spread mainly eastward to involve two neighboring countries, Italy and

Germany, whose roots went back to the universal powers of medieval times, making them a chosen target for French expansionism, since they were keen as ever to have some prestigious endorsement of the status of France as a great imperial nation. As a result, both Italy and Germany learned to aspire to the ambivalent, volatile status of nation-states, which they mistook for the *ne plus ultra* of progress and power, forgetting all that characterized their history and culture, and eventually won recognition for their statehood, the last countries in Europe to do so. Their entry onto the already crowded European scene could only cause further instability, especially so the massive presence of Germany, which was destined to become the real dominant power on account of its position and military and industrial resources. Heading toward a similar crisis was another great entity, of global proportions in this case, but Russia, unlike the western European countries, was to attain an authentic imperial dimension. It had the problem, however, of making the transition from a Byzantine caesaropapist mediation, essentially unchanging and ahistorical because already contemplated in the eternal dimension of the Resurrection, to a Western-type state mediation that makes change its mediatory raison d'être, extending ever wider to embrace further social strata.

And it was Russia, together with the Second *Reich*'s will to power, that determined the course of events in the summer of 1914, the tragic start of the end of European history; not so much because the mobilization of the tsarist empire on July 30 prompted Germany to mobilize and declare war, setting off a domino effect throughout the European alliances, and pushing Europe over the brink, but because Russia, so vast in extent and with its no less vast internal imbalances, contained the seeds of highly destabilizing future developments, as Dostoevsky predicted. The tension created in the Russian colossus between its Byzantine imperial identity and its absolute need to Westernize led to the second major precondition for the totalitarian phenomenon, the 1917 Revolution, in which the initiative passed to Lenin and the Bolsheviks. Since this became the matrix of totalitarianism in the twentieth century it is essential for us to analyze it. The Bolshevik Revolution was no less than a thoroughly systematic Westernization combined with the ability to keep the huge tsarist empire together thanks to a new mediation sanctioned from below, corresponding to the direct democracy of the soviets under the leadership of the Party, forming its advanced, armed guard. This absolute mediatory source was not the people generally but the proletariat,

the vast class of the exploited that now became the lowest politically qualified stratum on which to start building a permanent just society. The factor therefore providing the proletariat with an identity was its political nature, which enables it to give fresh objectual substance and momentum to what had previously been subject to devastating, indiscriminate exploitation, and set into motion an impressive series of revolutionary political mediations that continued the action of the proletariat with other means but identical ends. Politics was nothing but the sum total of relationships having their origin and destination in the proletariat, the living breath of the People demanding complete fulfillment of all aspects at all times unhesitatingly, since any uncertainty would already amount to betrayal.

That also determined the role and functions of the leader of the proletarians. The Party chief neither represents nor dominates it politically; he is instead its faithful executive, so perfect that he embodies the Party in its entirety and the proletarian assemblies that are its real backbone. He may in no way be disobeyed since he is the voice of the entire proletariat, in this case of the Russian people as a whole, while they in turn represent the advanced, armed guard of all the world's workers waiting to be set free. The Party secretary, in the very anonymity of his function, serves as a means of transmission for the popular will that potentially extends outward to include the whole world; he thus comes to have absolute power because the absolute on earth is what, in Hegelian and Marxist terms, he accomplishes. To disobey the Secretary, the Party, or the Proletariat becomes an offense just as absolute, to be punished by total elimination, by physical destruction, in itself a *damnatio memoriae,* the more effective since the guilty party is urged to see the error of his ways and acquiesce in the execution that will erase it and find withal a last chance for redemption in this final recognition, a posthumous possibility of being numbered among those enemies of the people who belatedly came to their senses and went before the firing squad for the edification of the same, with the blessing of the Chief of all the proletarians and of all politically qualified, and thereby truly existing, peoples. The ancient language of atonement comes to be translated into an unprecedented secular, political form in the service of freedom, a freedom not needing demonstration or proof since it has already been achieved, on a par with resurrection in Greek Orthodox theology; and as such, it justifies any oppression, any violation of individual rights, since it is fully, absolutely

present, while its violation is intolerable, inconceivable. It must therefore be expunged, like an error in logic, and duly banished from the horizontal, planned realm of definitive rationality.

The formidable mediatory and political solution put into practice by Leninism and Stalinism was enormously influential, and its effects were immediately felt in Germany, the leading nation in Europe in terms of population and industrial power, but newly subjected to a punitive treaty that sought to weaken and closely hem it in. In reality the armistice was a continuation of the war by other means, and Germany was waiting to take revenge at the first opportunity, soon to arise as a result of Europe's dependence on the financial markets of the United States. Ernst Nolte is right to note that Germany and the Soviet Union imitated each other in this period,[45] but it is also obvious that to speak of simple imitation in reference to entire nations and masses of people will tell us very little, unless we grasp the mediatory content of their relationships, the need to find points of collective identification that could regulate and revitalize their lives, since the old political and state institutions, as well as the religious ones, were no longer in a position to do so. Two principle factors made the Leninist solution as perfected by Stalin so strongly appealing: the first was the constitution of a pervasive, ubiquitous para-mediation that corresponded to no existing institution and possessed imperious, impelling universality; the second was the criterion of total elimination of everyone standing in the way of fulfilled universality, of absolute value as represented by the proletariat, the proletarian Party, and the leader of both. In the Bolshevik vision of the world no independent truth exists, nor any criterion of reality and truth that has independent status, since the proletarian and Party para-mediation is the only source of truth, the only criterion for defining reality and humanity.

Hitler took over this formula and applied it not to the proletariat but to the people of Germany, the *Volk,* regarded as the sole source of power and sovereignty. The Party and its leader came to be one with the German *Volk,* so the entire *Volk* was fully united and acted as one man in the person of the *Führer* and every member of the Party authorized by him. In the postwar period efforts were repeated ad nauseam to identify antecedents in German history and culture to explain the rise of Nazism. While conceding nothing to those attempts and without going back with Karl Raimund Popper to Plato in search of an explanation, there can be no doubt that something

in German history interacted strongly with the totalitarian retrovirus, and that factor was the identification of Germany with its people, quite apart from their various territories and states which had been subject to many changes in the nation's eventful history. This, together with a dramatic sense of instability and inferiority, had led Germany to react strongly against great and powerful neighbors, from the Roman Empire and the medieval papacy down to the confrontation with France in the turmoil and fervor of the Napoleonic period.[46]

The quite criminal humiliation inflicted on Germany by the Treaty of Versailles could not help but revive these specters of the past, making the country an ideal breeding ground for the totalitarian germs spreading from the East and multiplying uncontrollably under the impact of the economic crisis from the West. The shaky foundations of Germany's collective identity thus acquired a meaning no less distorted than it was distorting and became the German answer to the proletarian universalism of the Soviet Union that was felt as an immediate threat and a fatal omen for the future. The universalist, humanitarian *pathos* of Stalin's propaganda was lost in this ideological response since the criterion for humanity had been essentially redefined by taking the *Volk* as its premise. In other words, Stalinism's criteria for being part of humankind were established on a socioeconomic, class basis determined by politically qualified exploitation and as such could pertain to anyone, whereas the criteria for discrimination in Nazism aimed at being intrinsic and definitive, strictly *völkischen,* and so came to be defined on racial, biological lines. As such the crucial determinants were possessed from birth, and were therefore a matter of fate as inevitable as the laws of nature. Finally, there was a scientific or rather a technical criterion (but it is the same thing) for deciding whether an individual was a *Mensch* or an *Unter-Mensch,* a criterion, it should be remarked, that is practically the opposite to that of Nietzsche's *Übermensch* since superiority was conferred by the very normality assumed as exceptional and sanctioned at the mass level. The average man, mass-man as such *constituted* the superior race and was destined to rule: and so anyone at all, office or factory worker, jobless man or soldier, could feel he possessed a superhuman aura, decreed by nature, that was the only accepted norm, starting with the *Führer.*

The vertical structure of the Party became more marked, starting from the caesarist model developed by the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini,

combining D'Annunzio's nationalist charisma with Lenin's method for creating political centralization: the elimination of one's enemies verbally through propaganda, or physically. Mussolini applied, and modified, this recipe, adapting it to monarchy and the requirement for public order called for by the middle class, but it was only a question of time, a short time in fact, before it would be taken up and applied on a large scale. This came about as a result of the explosive situation in Germany and the apprenticeship to Lenin, Mussolini, and Stalin served by the leader of the Nazi Party. Hitler cast aside state and monarchic compromises and developed Mussolini's formula in line with the Asiatic and proletarian dimensions of the Soviet model; his is the creative genius as leader that could guarantee the usurped, absolute—in a word, theatrical—superiority of the dominant race, of the only noble, authentic human reality. This reality was put on public display using all available means—starting from mass-media and then involving public institutions, military force, and science—previously emptied and transformed into sheer technical instruments ready to celebrate and extol his power as sole representative of the masses, the *Volk*. And this implied killing anyone who was outside the given bioontological definition, anyone who merely ventured to exist, to claim inconceivably the right to exist without a political or racial qualification. Lenin's recipe for the total elimination of class enemies was organized and extended, and grew to horrifying proportions with methods to match when the politico-racial theory underwent the severe test of a new war for world domination. The bureaucratic mass extermination of Stalinism was thus succeeded by the first organized techno-scientific mass extermination, and these both continued and perfected the large-scale techno-military extermination carried out in the First World War, the matrix and incubator of all the future totalitarianisms.

In part my analysis agrees with that of Hannah Arendt. Building on what had been understood by Carl Schmitt, who remained in Germany after 1933, she recognizes the secret of totalitarian regimes to be the ever-changing, elusive forms of the "movement," that is, of the Party organization that once it has taken the state over, empties it out from within, leaving only a facade for its official operations and keeping power to itself, which it exercises in hidden, inscrutable ways.[47] Totalitarianism comes to be the extreme consequence of the decay of the nation-state, struggling with insoluble contradictions and its inadequacy to meet the challenges of world

power. A political monster results, created by the disintegration of the public sphere, of the shared representative dimension in which individuals previously could identify and fulfill themselves, whereas they now sink and go under in a desperate mass leveling where private interests have the upper hand and the individual feels lost in anguished isolation. Any alternative appearing to offer redemption and provide an identity seems preferable to that. With this Arendt very effectively describes what I call the mediatory crisis, though she has no theory of political mediation, much less of religious mediation, and makes no attempt at a wider-ranging theoretical and historical reconstruction, unlike Schmitt who clings desperately to the hope of salvaging something of the old European state, founded on law and order in the land.[48] In Arendt we find the effects but not the causes, and consequently the analysis of the effects is also incomplete and the real overall causal sequence is not established; Schmitt, on the other hand, shows us part of the causes and effects, but pulls back from the original source and the final results. Three general corollaries can be drawn from this that will help to make the reconstruction more complete and to sum up this present volume which has been concerned with the various stages of Christianity's long history, from antiquity in incipient decline, to the Middle Ages, and down to the world-shaking events of modern history.

The first corollary is that the mediatory crisis that led to the totalitarian phenomena was resolved by nothing less than the complete social destruction of what used to be called reality or the world. In other words there has been a total objectual collapse, and we are still far indeed from assessing its size and extent because we are more than ever involved in it, while the symptoms of mass disorientation and moral confusion grow more disturbing day by day. Under totalitarian regimes, "public opinion" (one of the most disastrous expressions of the present age) was willing to swallow any lie each time the propaganda machine presented it as the truth, so far disregarding all criteria for independent verification, for objectivity and the checking of details, as to cancel even the principle of noncontradiction, the major achievement of Greek *logos*. In that way it not only strikes a blow at the heart of every traditional idea of culture and cultural transmission, but even science itself, esteemed by practically all contemporary ideologies, loses its cognitive value and becomes techno-science, and purely instrumental in the hands of those in power.

The second corollary confronts us with the horrific functional ingenuity of totalitarian regimes and the phenomena that pave the way for them. The annihilation of all objective and objectual sense of reality opens up a prospect of unexplored frontiers of annihilation, the destruction of the mediatory and objectual threshold that other human beings represent for all human beings. To put it plainly, it becomes even easier to wipe out one's enemies where no shared objective and objectual reality exists, and once this destruction has been systematically organized by the totalitarian regime in question, it becomes serial and automatic. The technique, whether bureaucratized and heavy-handed, as with Stalin, or along the lines of Hitler's more industrialized and sinisterly creative form, ceases to be the mere instrument of political and military action; it transforms into the process itself, into the definitive authentication of the nonexistence of those destroyed by it, which is confirmed by the very fact of its being applied. A sort of verifiable crescendo occurs that finally affects all political regimes and all ideological positions.

The use of machine guns and gas in the First World War meant hundreds or thousands of men could be killed in a matter of minutes by virtue of an order delivered impersonally, of a circular put out by the general staff, of an inscrutable chain of command that had become senseless because any notion of the combatant as human was lost. Leninism drew the political consequences of this indiscriminate rationalization of indifference toward individual human lives; certainly lives had been sacrificed before then, but it had been for the sake of shared, world-creating mediatory ideals. In the 1930s the recipe prepared by positivistic industrial techno-science, fashioned by the military and perfected by the politicians, was transformed by Stalinism and Hitlerism into mass regimes where the extermination of countless people reinforced and fueled the infernal dynamism of the Party machines, supplying an impetus and an identity that would otherwise have collapsed at a less hectic pace. The Second World War brought a dizzying acceleration: extermination by aerial bombardment was first in the field, using the air force as a powerful new weapon. The Germans were the first to do this on a massive scale, but it was developed exponentially by the Allies; then, as Hitler's dream of early victory and world dominion began to fade, the Nazi regime implemented on a massive scale the scientific extermination known as the Holocaust;[49] and not by chance the end of the war came with the dropping of an atomic bomb for the first time in history, the enemy instantly dissolved

into atomized vapor, indistinguishable from the smoke produced by the appalling explosion.

This leads to the third corollary, namely that the victory of the "forces for Good" over the "forces for Evil" in the Second World War by no means put an end to the totalitarian phenomenon; that Manichean simplification continues to thrive thanks to the same objectual destruction that made it almost impossible to verify any aspect of the real world under Stalin and Hitler. Today, the means of mass communication are often, and quite willingly, controlled by undeclared power and pressure groups; consequently, rather than transmit real information about the world, they define and construct it according to ever-changing criteria linked to the interests, and even whims, of these invisible groups. The means of communication are not a record of reality, but rather reality exists on the basis of what is said or not said about it by the means of communication, which enjoy an increasingly undisturbed reign thanks to their technological proliferation and the absence of independent cultural instruments that might act to expose their workings, not to mention the total breakdown of the educational process, which has become a compliant tool serving the interests that have everything to gain from the miseducation of the masses. Or rather, since it is essential to keep the nuances of meaning that the global scale of the system described cannot materially destroy and on which it in fact thrives, these cultural, and even educational, means do endure and survive, but they no longer have the power to carry the masses, whole communities, along with them. They remain available to individuals who decide to resist and *exist,* in both the objectual and ontological senses, against all the anobjectual and antiontological tendencies of contemporary thinking.

From these there derives one final corollary that is by no means without its importance for our present argument, for Christianity, and also for completing the comparison of the Christian mediation with the ancient mediations, but it has attracted surprisingly little attention and reflection from those whose interest in Christianity is scientific or professional (proving that Christianity is anything but a regular profession). This further corollary is that the contemporary mediatory and objectual crisis, of which totalitarianism is the most dramatic phenomenon but is not at all a circumscribed or isolated one, goes beyond every historical and cultural notion of apocalyptic crisis and the end of time that Christian writers, or Christ himself, could

have conceived. I am not saying that the entire apocalyptic vision of early Christianity is obsolete and useless, but that its historical, mythical formulation is inevitably dated insofar as it posits the divine mediation, and the diabolic mediation that the divine must combat and defeat. Once more it is the death of God announced by Nietzsche that marks a watershed, a dividing line that we must take the measure of and pass over if we are not to make Christianity what the madman describes at the end of aphorism 125, that is, the grave and tomb where every serious, credible idea of God lies buried. And the extent to which the central phrase of the aphorism—"Shouldn't we also become gods?"—has become depressingly applicable to our present civilized state is shown by the spreading epidemic of suicidal terrorism that claims to affirm God by blowing up one of his creatures degraded to being his suicidal and homicidal announcer, with the use of manipulative techniques and media exploitation that make the old totalitarianisms appear amateurish by comparison.

On the face of it, the apocalyptic nature of the contemporary situation, understood as an apocalypse always present and materializing all the time within history, would appear to warrant the most drastic confrontation, an epic struggle between the forces of Good and Evil. The temptation to oppose the totalitarian phenomena with their own vocabulary and semantics dies hard—that is, to use the tone of propaganda introduced by the victorious powers in the Second World War (one of whom, I repeat, was no less than a victorious totalitarian regime), but it must be resisted with every means, if for no other reason than that it is the language favored by the now rampant globalitarianism, the prime cause of the violence it denounces in the enemy of the moment. It is not a question of whipping up charges, or identifying the guilty, concealed because undifferentiated, which from a theoretical viewpoint makes them indifferent. And this position, cognitive and therefore existential and resistive, suggests the one possible antidote to the mass demonization that now holds the whole world in its grip: to grow in understanding the matters we are concerned with here, and to listen to the faint but persistent voice of human reason. This is not the enlightened, positivist voice Freud had in mind when he wrote *The Future of an Illusion,*[50] but the voice of reason based on awareness of the history that made it possible and threatens it at every turn, because human reason proceeds by putting itself at risk, contending all by itself with radical reversals from whose unexpected

developments it then arises time and again, and each time as if it were the first and last. Religious mediation, and particularly a religious mediation such as the Christian that has made mediation its very raison d'être, is an inevitable step in this progress, and any rationalism that would rashly claim to dispense with it is shown to be an illusion.

It still remains to be seen whether, and in what ways, we can recognize the cross and use it as the last remaining means to keep our bearings in this strange unclassifiable scene of struggle. And it is indeed a struggle, not in the mythical, propagandistic guise of a fight between the forces of Good and Evil, but in the more realistically incisive terms of a struggle within ourselves, involving our relationship with the past, with what we now are, and with our origin. The struggle assumes that there is an alternative, and the alternative is shown to us if we delve deep into the Christian revelation. Two of the most famous and least explained images in the Gospels cast a figural light that clarifies the whole question: Jesus quelling the storm and walking on the waters. These so-called miracles of nature are a source of much perplexity for the modern reader,[51] faced with the dilemma of taking them literally or as myth, whereas what is needed is a figural reading, *in figuris* and *imaginalis,* to teach us something about the real tenor of Christ's mediation and the criteria by which to recognize it. The preliminary question we must ask ourselves is: who can follow Christ's mediation where practicable mediations are ineffectual or absent, in the midst of raging historical tempests, along watery paths no human feet can tread?

## 5. Jesus and the Storms of History

The answer to such a question is bound to be new and in line with the calamitous times that give rise to it, and that removes any suggestion of a foregone conclusion about our relationship to the texts establishing the Christian mediation; indeed, it obliges us to reexamine them thoroughly without in any way minimizing the distance that separates us from them. Even without examining those texts very closely, it is patently obvious that the world in which they were written, the world in which Jesus lived, had no idea of the terrifying, tsunami-like phenomena of today's standardized society with its fundamentally constructive and destructive character, quite capable

of completely sweeping away the past. Such being the case, the texts that might appear best-adapted for the purpose, the apocalyptic texts contained in certain pericopes in the synoptics and in Revelation, the last book in the New Testament, prove disappointing if we disregard the theological and historical context in which they were developed and miss their wider religious significance, which we can correctly recognize only if we know the cultural background in which they were composed and the problems they set out to define and answer once and for all. If the besetting problem in Middle-Judaic apocalyptic literature was how to identify the mediator or mediators capable of restoring Yahweh's full sovereignty over Israel, the major preoccupation of Christian apocalyptic writers was how to identify the manner and timing of Christ's definitive mediation when it would manifest its dominion over history, with no trace of deferment and obscurity, setting his chosen people within the heavenly Jerusalem forever, victoriously fulfilling a providential history.

These mediatory ideas therefore have very little that humankind might find useful today, tormented by its anxiety about the transience and insubstantiality of things, a state induced not by a sense of a definitive mediation about to irrupt but by the loss of all credible mediations, by the lack of any mediatory horizon that might bring salvation passing by way of destruction, defeating it, and making it a means to serve its ends. The mediatory disintegration in our age and its loss of all objectual substance have reached a point where it is ever more difficult even to represent the destruction that superficially obsesses us so greatly. In the world of the death of God the object is not destroyed by being attacked and torn to pieces but simply by the fact that nobody believes in it from the start. In the world of the death of God the end of the world is brought about not by some spectacular catastrophe but by an imperceptible inner evaporation; at the end nothing is left since existence itself becomes inconceivable, a mere appearance void of life and meaning. Is not this perhaps the end threatening us? In our collective perception there is no horizon of absolute mediation that awaits us and passes judgment on us, and no Christological possessor of the divine mediation who takes that function on himself and before whom we should go in fear and trembling. No eschatology of the end of the world exists where the world ends a priori through implosion, inanity, and irrelevance. It is not only ingenuous to imagine that apocalyptic texts written two thousand years ago might speak to us

verbatim,[52] or virtually so; it is itself part of the disintegration of the object and meaning that these present prophecies of doom deceive themselves in thinking they can remedy, or worse still, take satisfaction in imagining some exemplary punishment. Prognoses based on diagnoses that take no account of the patient's true condition are a waste of time at present, and such an anobjectual medicine, rather than inspiring hope, turns out to be a further symptom of an unidentified and incurable disease, unidentified because incurable or incurable because unidentified.

Quite clearly a completely different hermeneutic and historical investigation is needed. It is not so much a series of predictions that emerges from the apocalyptic writings in the New Testament with their images of myth and symbol, but an inner structure of revelation and of the reactions provoked by it, where the same theme is present, in various forms and circumstances, and with expectations that differ according to the writer's *Sitz im Leben* and culture. The theme in question is the Christological totality of the mediation, before which the world is called on to take a position, to accept or to reject. From this point of view, the fulfilled eschatology of the fourth Gospel and its school appears as the fully mature expression of a line of thinking that reveals demonstrable traces in the ideas of the historical Jesus. This is the apocalyptic writing that we need, which, in its turn, has no need of Last Trumpets and terrifying threats because the real Last Judgment facing the world is the lost but recoverable sense of the human object and of the Mediation that enables us to experience it. The Christian message thus begins to reveal its ability to meet the apocalyptic challenges of our time, to provide an answer to its loss of mediation and reality, not by moral condemnation or by making appeals to a heaven that has become empty in the meantime, but by penetrating into the creative, deep structure of everyday life, revealing a hidden, illuminating scheme that is a resource, and in itself already supplies an answer. So there is no need to single out prophetic passages, or striking, magniloquent episodes that sound warnings and offer consolation, since what we must look at is the gospel message as a whole, and identify the overall direction taken by the texts.

How unexpectedly close to our situation that gospel announcement comes is suggested by texts that at first glance might appear secondary or miraculous. Such is the episode where Jesus quells the storm that arises while he is asleep on a boat with the disciples, a scene that caught the imagination

of Rembrandt in the seventeenth century and even more meaningfully Eugène Delacroix two centuries later. Both painters emphasize the tempestuous aspect in a symbolic representation of the infinitely greater storm clouds that they felt gathering over their own times. This is a perfectly legitimate interpretation suggested by the gospel episode itself. We will look at the pericope in Mark, the earliest version, which was taken up later by the other synoptic Gospels, and possibly comes from a pre-Marcan collection of "'big' miracles with a certain 'massive' character," as Meier puts it making reference to the subsequent miracles of the Gerasene demoniac and the raising of Jairus's daughter.[53] The episode in question occurs on the lake of Gennesaret, in an area where much of Jesus's activity in Galilee took place. Because of the generic nature of terms used to describe different stretches of water in antiquity, the lake is called a "sea," but this is also a case of narrative and symbolic *amplificatio:*

> And the same day, in the evening, <Jesus>[54] said to them: "Let us pass over to the other side." And, leaving the crowd, they took him with them seated in the boat, and there were other boats behind him. And there arose a great storm of wind that drove the waves into the boat, so that the boat was filled with water. Meanwhile he was asleep on a pillow at the stern. They awoke him and said to him: "Master, do you not care if we perish?" And <Jesus> arose and rebuked the wind and said to the sea: "Be silent and still!" And the wind ceased and there was a great calm. And then he said to them: "Why are you so afraid? Do you not still have faith [*pistin*]?" And they were exceedingly afraid [*ephobethesen phobon megan*] and said one to another: "What manner of man is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" (4:35–41)

In approaching this episode, we must avoid both a literal interpretation, which makes no sense to us since it does not correspond to our present-day perception of reality and the object, and a perfunctorily symbolic one, disregarding the real significance that the miracle had for the evangelist and has continued to have over the centuries. Indeed we need to move within an interpretive space that brings us close to the original text and the bases of its own self-interpretation but also affords us, in the course of our interpretation, the solicitude within our modern conceptual ambience to sense resonances

with that text that bring us still closer to it—resonances not arbitrary but authentically perceived. In this regard the first observations to make concern the nature of this passage, profoundly alien to our mentality.

The evangelist assumes from the start that the natural elements are personal and pneumatic forces, and they are addressed by Jesus in a peremptory, commanding tone of voice: it is clear from the context that they are demonic forces like those of real demons but act blindly under compulsion, and the will of their divine mediator is to subject them to a superior order. If this mediation is interrupted by the interference of a perverse, wicked will, as is the case with demons and human beings who follow them, then nature's demonic forces become demoniacal and must be fought. In the Judaic and early Christian world, the most common and most critical example of such degeneration was represented by sexuality; sex was made subject to divine sanctification through marriage, otherwise it was nothing but *porneia,* fornication and prostitution. With his vision of marriage as Adam and Eve in the Garden before the Fall—an apocalyptic vision therefore—Jesus was only taking assumptions shared with Judaism as a whole at the time to their ultimate conclusion. For such a mentality there are no objective, neutral natural phenomena since they must all be mediated by the divine will that brought them into existence, and if this is true for nature itself there is every reason to suppose it must be true for a creature endowed with a will, a heart, and a mind such as man. The *pistis* that Jesus reproaches the disciples for lacking consists precisely in this relationship of trusting surrender to the mediation of God; and the disciples in fact have a distorted, reversed view of things, giving pride of place to the material elements of nature over the spiritual, fountainhead relationship that consigns them to the subordinate, instrumental role that is rightfully theirs. The disciples with their fear of drowning represent the human creatures submerged, in spirit more than materially, by a creation whose meaning and origin they do not understand. And although these remarks already bridge the gap between far-off mediatory and intermediating representations and our more immediate considerations, we still need to determine the decisive aspect of the mediator at the center of the pericope, Jesus himself, before we can adequately approach the message of the text.[55]

The first point to make about this episode, certainly based on an earlier source, is that it transmits a very elevated Christology, once more confirming

the need to exclude all idea of evolutionism of a positivist stamp from the development of Christology in the New Testament, although in Mark there is as yet none of the preexisting Christology such as we find in the fourth Gospel. But, as should already be clear, we must avoid thinking in terms of evolutionary stages, not because there was no evolution but because its starting point was an extremely powerful experience and intuition, the experience and intuition of the incarnate mediation of Christ as a whole, of his complete, definitive title to the divine mediation that Middle Judaism had long sought in numerous and varied mediators, prophets, kings, and priests who were perpetually in conflict with one another. None of them managed to tackle the problem of how to gain full access to the sovereignty of Yahweh, though the effect of some, the losers, proved to be more lasting because it was transcendent as compared to the sordid dimension of worldly power. The idea of Christ's mediation as complete and definitive drew strength from this hidden current and passed beyond the watershed represented by the experience of the Resurrection, but the idea itself could never have formed without its specific precedent in the preaching of Jesus and in the interpretation of his task and figure that he transmitted. The entire pericope contains an important reflection on Christology, that is, on the real nature and origin of the Christological mediator, and this renders superfluous or misleading any rationalistic explanation of the episode as based on a possible historical event, even going back to an actual storm experienced on the lake of Gennesaret that was survived thanks to the presence and assistance of Jesus.[56] It is true that the Bible texts share with the *mythoi* and literary creations of all cultures the device of *amplificatio,* but here the device must be substantially overturned, since the corresponding mediatory truth is the starting point of the textual formation, and thus its cognitive and objectual goal, a truth that now moves into the position of being the criterion for interpreting reality and history.

As a result of the Christological reflection that has gone into the piece, Jesus appears as completely in control of events from beginning to end. He gives the order to cross the lake so that he may pursue his mission, quite calmly falls asleep in the stern of the boat, and—in the logic of the story—would have gone on sleeping if the terrified disciples had not awakened him, with words that are, moreover, an indirect reproach since they presume Jesus's indifference to their mortal peril. In short, his sleeping takes on connotations

on several levels, coming to foreshadow his absence and the fear that his mediation will turn out to be ineffectual and inaccessible. And this refers to two separate but connected moments in time: the first when, immediately following the Crucifixion, the disciples felt overwhelmed and lost; and the second, the delayed appearance of the *parousia,* the second and final coming of Christ to judge humankind and conclude its history. Fervently awaited by the early Christian communities, its failure to transpire most probably sowed seeds of doubt and uncertainty, and weakened the collective and individual experience of *pistis* in Christ. During the frantic, atrocious events of the Passion, the storms of a terrible and unfathomable history had weighed down on the tiny community of Jesus's followers, and still now continued to do so as it sailed in straits where hopes were high but ever in danger of being dashed on the rocks of disappointment, of being contradicted by the facts. We can recognize an analogy here with the presence, albeit more like an absence, of Christ's mediation in the stormy seas of contemporary history.

However, the analogy must not cause us to lose sight of the differences. For the early Christians, Christ was always with them in their boat that, at this point, quite clearly symbolizes the community, the church. In the ancient world it was a recurrent emblem of community, and this significance is undoubtedly present in the construction of the Marcan pericope, as Strauss thought,[57] and as the scholars applying the historical-critical method today recognize.[58] This sense, originating in myth and symbol, becomes still more attractive if we think of the use of aquatic phenomena—floods, deluges, storms—to symbolize cataclysmic events affecting the public at large, but we must be careful not to be too eager about modernizing these correspondences since they worked at the level of textual genesis, and not in the conscious minds of the writers and historical actors. Christ appears to be inoperative because his disciples lack faith, not because he is really absent; and in fact everything unfolds with direct consequential logic, attesting to a confidence that, at the right moment, the Son would intervene in any case and effortlessly impose his command over the elements unleashed by the created world, no matter whether they were historical or natural, by means of a power that his followers understood to be most real. This ties in with a series of Old Testament passages expressing the God of Israel's command over the sea, and his promptness to come to the rescue of those who put their trust in him, as at the crossing of the Red Sea out of Egypt. However, it would

be an inexcusable simplification to interpret this symbolism as glorying in the powers of God. And there is no suggestion of that in the paintings of Rembrandt and Delacroix who have instead visualized an agonizing event, with the disciples about to be completely overwhelmed.

Interpreted historically and theologically, the sleep of Jesus is in no sense a catnap intended to show the Son of God as superior and unsinkable, since it bears a correspondence with the experience of the Passion. This is equivalent to saying, to use modern terms that are more distressing and extreme but far from arbitrary, that the sleep of Jesus equates to his death and therefore to the death of God. This calls to mind another biblical link to which both Matthew and Luke make explicit reference (Mt 12:39 et seq.; Lk 11:29 et seq.): the sign of the prophet Jonah who was cast overboard to save the ship on which he had embarked from sinking.[59] This Old Testament metaphor suggests that we are very probably looking at a *logion* traceable to Jesus himself, not only on account of its enigmatic form that the Gospels attempt in vain to close and resolve, but also for the resemblance it bears, by no means a close one, to Jesus's destiny: Jonah is caught up in the storm because he refuses to obey God, whereas Jesus intends to obey the divine mediation completely to the very end. But, as with the parables, his thinking can only be reconstructed if we grasp the essential, qualifying points in the images he sets before us. In Jonah's case, the analogy lies strictly in what happens to him, that is, his being thrown overboard by his own wish, a choice made when he comes to his senses, whereas with Jesus it becomes a purposive, premeditated choice. In Matthew, an analogy is drawn with the three days and nights between the death of Christ and his resurrection; this is not found in Luke and is clearly an addition by the first evangelist, added in the light of what happened or was perceived in the Passion, which gives us a glimpse of a still undefined predictive nucleus that might come from Jesus himself. This historically verifiable detail enables us to understand the meaningful dynamism of the episode and its essentially Christological character.

The Jesus who sleeps through the storm is not a divinity of the pagan type, its superiority over humans included, but on the contrary a mediator who fully shares in their experience, a human savior who lets himself be (almost!) engulfed by the waves and in that way, through a willingness to sacrifice himself that his disciples cannot understand, reveals his divine origin. This incomprehension on the part of his followers is a typical theme in

the Gospel of Mark and is the reason why Jesus accuses them of cowardice, as they are still completely unwilling to accept the gift of his life that is the salient, authenticating feature of the Christic mediator under his full Christological title. And his remark takes on a sad irony at the close of the episode where the text states that the disciples, far from changing their minds, were gripped by fear—*phobon*—essentially even greater, underlined by the alliterative ἐφοβήθησαν φόβον. The final question as to who might be capable of such great wonders reveals their preoccupation with the superficial and outward logic of power and thereby foreshadows the desertion and flight of all the disciples at the time of Jesus's arrest, and the fearful state of the women when the angel tells them that Christ has risen. One further powerful suggestion comes from this explanation that is strictly consistent with the Marcan Christology.

If Jesus sleeping prefigures Jesus dead and awaiting resurrection, then the disciples, wide awake and frightened, reveal their limited awareness, itself sleeping and foreshadowing death; and their alarmed question—"Master, do you not care if we perish?"—denotes a lack of *pistis,* together with the form of address they still use, the Christic master. This opens up a vague area of existential and hermeneutic ambiguity that characterizes the long history of Christianity. When all is said and done, the miracle occurs because the disciples awaken Christ, and yet his response consists in a spectacular deception, a display of sovereign power over nature that tells us nothing essential, proved by the nonchalance with which Jesus orders the wind and waves to cease, as if responding to a cry for help from frightened children incapable of understanding. The real miracle, the real manifestation of Christ, would consist in their facing the storm with Jesus in the boat and accepting the risk of dying with him and for him without outward signs or miracles which taken by themselves are misleading and equivocal. Choosing the boat to symbolize church and community reveals the evangelist's profound reflection about his very church, in which the mediation of Christ was present but constantly threatened to become an expectation of miracles that would have meant spiritual death, and would have been powerless to face the real storms ahead for those who chose to follow Christ. Interpretations of the episode usually assume the miracle to be *the answer* given by Jesus to his followers of little faith, not realizing that, understood materially, it is the mark and consequence of a weak and spiritually unmotivated faith. The correct reading of

the text is therefore imaginal and figural, explaining the events and images as signs of the only truth, the truth of the resurrected Christ because he accepted and experienced violent death at the hands of men. In the wretched storms of this world, shipwreck represents the real victory; and that may serve as a warning for an age like our own in particular, not only battered by complete and utter turmoil worldwide, which has led from totalitarianism to a suffocating globalization that deserves to be called globalitarianism, but also ground down by an arrogant, perverse cult of power and appearance that is the real ideological cement binding this world together. And it is a world that has capitulated completely to covert financial and technological control, a world trapped in the media falsifications of its unreal, anobjectual, illusory mediations.[60] We should ask ourselves what *pistis* in Christ will be required in a world where the power to quell the wind and the waves will be in the hands of some technocrat. At that point, we shall either possess the real spiritual meaning of Christ's mediation, or it will never more be heard on earth.

The cross in its meaning as the destruction and rebirth of the mediation shows itself to be at the heart of the Christian scriptures, and also of an interpretation of history that faces up to the fundamental, dramatic problem of the mediation and its objectual reality. The matching episode to the calming of the storm, the pericope of Jesus walking on the water, is relevant to this so we will look at it briefly, again in the Marcan version, to see how it can complement and complete what has already been said. There is another synoptic version (Mt 14:22–33) and an independent parallel in John 6:16–21,[61] so that the miracle story satisfies the criterion of various witness, but here I want to deal mainly with the mediatory meaning of the pericope, in order to catch some suggestions useful for closing our long journey between antiquity and modernity. Mark's episode comes immediately after the feeding of the five thousand and begins with Jesus telling the disciples to go before him to the other side of the lake; he then sends the crowd away so that he can go up onto the mountain to pray:

> In the evening, the boat was in the middle of the sea, while he remained alone on the shore. And seeing they were struggling to row since the wind was against them, and it being the fourth watch of the night, he went toward them over the water and would have passed them by. But when they saw him walking on the sea, they thought it was a spirit [*phantasma*]

> and cried out; for they all saw him and were shaken. But he spoke to them at once and said: "Take heart, it is I [*ego eimi*]; don't be afraid." He went up into the boat and the wind ceased; and they were extremely frightened in themselves: they had in fact understood nothing of the loaves, and their hearts were hardened. (6:47–52)

Also in this case, any attempt to trace a possible historical basis for the story would set us off on the wrong track: the pericope really has to be placed in strict sequence with the preceding miracle of the loaves, as the evangelist himself says, and undoubtedly he received it in connection with that text;[62] moreover, it needs to be interpreted in a wider sequence with the calming of the storm, both episodes sharing the motif of the wind dying down. This time, however, the elements calm down as the result of a sort of divine automatism, not an explicit command, and Jesus decides to perform the miracle out of concern for his disciples in trouble, clearly aware of the immediate effect his presence would have on the wind. But this is not made explicit, which tells us that it is not the point of the episode. To put the accent on the physical miracle would destroy the message the passage intends to convey, and we in our turn must venture out on treacherous interpretive waters that can be crossed only when we have gathered the real point of the episode. The Gospel of Matthew dramatizes this hermeneutic aspect in an elegant allusion to the church, adding the incident of Peter wanting to follow the Lord and walk on the water, which he manages to do up to a certain point but then sinks because of his insufficient faith. The explanation for all these features, as the better commentaries make clear, is that we are in the presence of a full manifestation of Christ as the Son of God, a veritable Christophany, which as such implies resurrection. As Strauss already understood, although without stressing the Paschal origin of the episode, the Matthean detail of Peter sinking in the water is a symbolic synthesis of his triple denial, from which his resurrected master saves him.[63]

The second Marcan episode thus presents the third moment, which is actually the central one between the two moments of Jesus's death and the post-Paschal waiting for his *parousia:* the Resurrection, which nevertheless appears less than sufficient if we are to take it as a single event, a prodigious occurrence to be beheld in a passive, mythical manner.[64] The Christological affirmation is not problematic at all, and is full. Jesus shows that he is one

with Yahweh, as is proven by the Christological answer "it is I" (ἐγώ εἰμι: I am) that we already saw in Luke and John,[65] and that "made the story especially attractive" to the high Christology of the fourth Gospel.[66] The presence of this solemn declaration in the earlier Gospel of Mark shows that it goes back some way in the tradition; in Mark, however, it acquires a reassuring, affectionate connotation that signifies first of all that it really is Jesus in the flesh, and not some spirit, coming to the aid of the disciples. The overlap with the narrative structure of texts concerning the Resurrection becomes more marked, while developing specific links to Jesus's mission and the everyday world that he wanted to be an integral part of. It thus contains a reflection on the significance of the Resurrection for our understanding of the life of Jesus, and about how its presence can be perceived in the lives of his followers. The decisive point is not the Resurrection as a miraculous event located in a great past, as a sensational theophany hopefully returning in a not too distant future, but as the unforeseeable, and for this very reason connected, consequence of a choice and testimony completely affirmed by Jesus, and fully perceptible in the present experience of those that believe in him.

The placing of the sensational Christophany immediately after the miracle of the loaves emphasizes its continuity with the Eucharistic significance of that episode, while the waters of the lake come to symbolize the chaos of human violence, of the mediatory and objectual crises from which humankind has always had to defend itself by finding the Archimedean point of mediation based on sacrifice, on crushing and killing someone. Besides we can perhaps understand this as the way Mark and the synoptics express a crisis factor in Jesus's preaching in Galilee that John condenses into a misunderstanding of the miracle of the loaves and fishes and rejection of the discourse about the Eucharist. Both episodes, then, are speaking to us about the Passion. Jesus walks supreme over these waters not because he is outwardly superior but because he knows them and is not afraid of them, and obeys a mediation infinitely stronger and not measurable in material terms, the loving mediation of the Father. And it is to an understanding of this that the hearts of the disciples appear still to be impervious. The apparently miraculous nature of the episode thus falls away and the work of the interpretive criterion, already seen in the pericope of stilling the storm, is complete. If we seize on the portentous aspects of the scene, as

many have, we understand nothing, but if instead we immediately decipher its theological and sacramental symbolism, everything becomes clear and intelligible. And the result of the wrong interpretive approach is evident to us in the disciples' conviction that what they see is a spirit, a supernatural apparition like the *phasma* of Dionysus appearing to Pentheus in the *Bacchae;* and we are warranted in extending this passage to apply to the pseudo-mediations of the media today and their electronic *phantasmata* that are far more deceptive because, unlike the ancient variety, they have no objectual value, as a rule; indeed, they often aim to mislead by creating surrealities to be taken for the only true reality, to the advantage of economic and political interests that are only too real.

Dante, who has already helped us along the way, provides the best commentary on this message, which is not limited to being Christological but becomes primarily Christogonic since it teaches us how to renew Christ's mediation in ourselves even in the most difficult times. Beatrice, when she introduces herself to Virgil in crypto-Christological terms, describes Christ's mediatory supremacy at moments of crisis and distress, which, after all, are a feature of every human existence ever faced with the precariousness of its object. Let us reread the already quoted passage from the second canto of *Inferno,* which expresses the spiritual premise of the whole *Comedy:*

> We need only fear those things
> with power to harm others;
> not other things, since they are not fearful.
> God, by his grace, has made me such
> that your wretched state does not touch me,
> nor any flame of this fire burn me. (II, 88–93)

Our wretched state (*miseria,* in the double sense of misfortune and inferior moral condition) does not touch Christ because, unlike us, he fears only what can harm others, namely, ourselves; otherwise, he is always ready to suffer for our salvation and carry the cross, and therein lies the secret of his mediation, enabling him to walk unharmed through the blazing infernos of our history, through the flames of every deflagration, comparable to the collective and individual storms that he alone has the means and authority to pacify in this world, calming all fear and agitation in our hearts. In these

words of Dante, the Christic mediation is confirmed as a guiding light and a probe to sound the depths, unexpectedly supreme over the most treacherous elements, the maelstroms of history and humankind. And that can be the best way to round off my survey of the cross and the historical significance of the Christian mediation in relation both to the theatrical tragedies of antiquity, so filled with anguish and, for that reason, so profoundly influential on the finest pages of the Bible, and to the proliferation of tragedies in the modern theaters of terror and war. While their cultural influence has yet to be gathered, their absolute barbarity qualifies them as the central issue for philosophy in our time.

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Something essential, however, has yet to be said about the end of Christ's life, the main inspiration for the episodes showing Jesus dominating the elements, and also about the possible contribution made to them by classical culture. To conclude this inquiry something must be said about the Resurrection that, as Celsus noted, shows a correspondence to numerous other mythological events relating to the death and rebirth of a divine figure. How are we to comparatively classify and understand the resurrection of Christ? There could not be a more necessary and more embarrassing closure for this book of mine, not only because the Resurrection is difficult or impossible to classify, but because it inverts the formula of the argument; it opens instead of closing, and rather than bringing out distinctions and formulas in some way definitive, it reformulates and reshuffles. However, the difficulty of surmounting this final comparative hurdle is an advantage in itself, since it will force us to return to the origins, to our starting point in ancient Greece, for one last comparison. Such a trial for knowledge would be bound to fail completely unless it also implied seeking the most real knowledge, which is recognition in accord with the truth of what can be attained within a historical and cultural context, a recognition that could be so much more significant in the present context of anxiety, as we look toward the end of an age, of an entire cultural eon, preluding designs of destruction and rebirth that none can predict. Thus, comparison with the idea and experience of a definitive rebirth that marked and shaped the entire history of the West seems all the more unavoidable.

CONCLUSION

# A Point of Arrival and Departure

## 1. The Enigma of the Resurrection

To conclude the present study, there could be no better subject, or worse, none more pertinent or less appropriate than the Resurrection. Indeed there is a risk that the declaredly phenomenological, nonapologetic structure I have aimed at in my treatment will break down at this final stage, overstepping the mark as it crosses this final threshold—if we may assume that all preceding thresholds were crossed without mishap from the scientific and philosophical point of view.

Whether we accept it as a matter of faith or look on it as a typical collective hallucination, the resurrection of Christ seems to fall quite definitely outside the picture, outside the applicable cognitive parameters. And the comparativistic objection could be said to deliver the coup de grâce, by drawing parallels that lead many people to believe that the climactic event in Christ's life never took place and leave them prey to the extreme objections found in Celsus. Sharing the Middle-Platonic spiritual vision of God, this pagan polemicist no longer believed in the archaic rebirth of gods and divine figures; he ridiculed Christian belief and likened it to the fabled and fictitious resurrections of myth and classical legend; and finally he dismissed

faith in resurrection in the flesh as illogical and absurd: "But the flesh is full of things it is nicer not to mention, and to make it irrationally [*paralogos*] eternal is something God would not and could not do."[1] Celsus's disparaging skepticism can already be recognized in an episode in the Acts of the Apostles (17:16–34) when Paul is speaking in Athens. He announces Jesus and the resurrection, and his listeners at first take the Greek word for resurrection, *anastasis,*[2] to be the name of a new god; and then, when Paul talks about resurrection in the real sense, some of them make fun of him but others want to discuss it further another time, perhaps because they accept some sort of philosophical and/or mystery version of resurrection.

This episode from Acts shows how weak, vague, and questionable the notion of resurrection had become, but at the same time it could be evidence of the continuance in middle antiquity of some idea of "corporeal" revival after death (and what that adjective means is far from clear). But irrespective of how we interpret the pericope in Acts, the idea continued to exist. Christianity spread in a classical world that, on the one hand, had lost or modified its representations of the rebirth of divinities and of the dead, and on the other had developed them in two complementary directions that were able to combine, concentrating the idea of theological and eschatological rebirth in the beliefs of Eastern and mystery cults, or purifying that idea in metaphysical visions of a spiritualistic type like in the Middle-Platonic Plutarch. Of those, belief in the immortality of the soul is ultimately an extreme example, since the soul is conceived as an entity composed of fine spiritual material as in Stoicism, and in any case is linked, even when conceived as immaterial as in Platonism, to phenomena and processes of an intermedial character. As an initial conclusion we can say that a satisfactory historical view of such an elusive subject must overcome truly enormous interpretive obstacles because while we moderns rely on antitheses rooted in antiquity, such as body/soul or matter/spirit, we have completely lost the intermedial and pneumatic support that made possible the coexistence of such opposites.

Modern historians have studied and classified the religious beliefs of archaic and ancient cultures about immortality and rebirth after death, and essentially ascribed them to projective representations, which would appear to corroborate that Christian belief is similar in nature and rationally untenable in principle.[3] However, modern criticism of the Resurrection goes beyond predictable objections and attacks the credibility of religious

representations as such, given that their mediatory and intermedial framework, their *mundus imaginalis*, has since disappeared. Because of its universal reach the comparative argument today implies that not only Christianity but humanity's entire religious sphere must be dismissed, according to the immanentist, techno-scientific assumption that dominates society and culture. Nobody thinks to point out that by rejecting all the mediations and cultural objectualities through which humanity constitutes its image over thousands of years, this assumption is potentially the surest premise and promise of present and future dehumanization; it is the leveling, antihistorical germ of all totalitarianisms, now and yet to come. And this also has an unexpected and culturally significant consequence, which is my final conclusion after many years devoted to the study of the fascinating theme of comparing Dionysus and Christ; namely, that there is no absolute, inevitable opposition between classical antiquity and Christianity, since both are on the side of humanity and history, which is now facing the threat of the most massive objectual negation ever to take shape on this Earth.

The clash between Nietzsche and Girard, who respectively championed the causes of Dionysus and Christ, appeared to be as necessary to clarify the terms of the comparative question as it now seems inadequate to take it forward, let alone resolve it. Once again, what is missing is a medium, a *tertium quid* capable of joining what is unilaterally opposed, a bridge to give a purchase to an old and new transitivity, an object- and world-creating transitivity open to the future because it is steeped in history and potentially unlimited exactly because it is aware of its limits. The confrontation of *Kultur* with *Zivilisation,* of human noumenon with phenomenon—our starting point with Thomas Mann—now presents a new face, with history confronted by antihistory, humanization by dehumanization, and the safeguarding of the world and worlds by their global leveling-down. The vast scale of the contest has entailed all manner of tumult and confusion, which undermine essential distinctions from the very start and have opened the way to contamination and horrific dangers, as the history of Europe and the world in the last century demonstrated only too clearly. In fact, the forces engaged in this invisible battle were infinitely more transversal and cross-categorial than either warring party could even remotely imagine, and the danger they denounced in each other—disregarding conceptually the possibility of bad faith, which has always had the last word anyway—really originated from

their refusal to consider both sides of the problem of humanity. Each of the contending parties wanted an absurdity, that is, a one-sided mountain, a peak literally erected on a void, on nothing. The response of my investigation is to bring out, by working through and beyond the modern contrapositions, the uniqueness and infinite plasticity of the human phenomenon.

But what has the Christic and Christian resurrection to do with all this? Firstly, there is the type of experience and event that it is, which for proper evaluation needs to be grasped in both its specific element and universal intention. As to the Resurrection event, whatever our personal view may be, we must not lose sight of its pervasive power to resignify and illuminate human experience at the level of its originating and final ecstatic-objectual characteristics, concentrating its consciential and moral intentionality in a manner that aims to be nothing short of definitive. In this respect the historical and cultural influence of the Christian resurrection goes far beyond statements of faith and is found where we least expect it. When Nietzsche asks himself and his audience the boldly rhetorical question "Shouldn't we also become gods?," what he has in mind is a self-divinization conceivable only through the Christic resurrection, since it is accompanied by a clear perception of history and existence that the events of Easter brought into history, more than the vague and ahistorical resurrections of paganism. There is an intangible asymmetry in the Dionysus/Christ isomorphism that strikes a deadly blow at Nietzsche's *projected* Eternal Return in its attempt to obliterate Christ's return by assimilating it to the innumerable Dionysian recurrences, putatively cyclic, and in actual fact introduces a fatal and revealing historical irreversibility. And so the Resurrection also becomes something it never intended to be: the repressed and removed return of a revenant, of an objectual manifestation that for us has become a ghostly memory, a reversal making modern man, who has settled for the death of the God he is unwilling to see, the ghostly copy of man as he once was. Therefore, to retrieve the Resurrection, we must adopt the phenomenological-historical criterion of this investigation as a whole, irrespective of any more personal position regarding it.

To that end I shall proceed in two sequences. The first will take another look at the Resurrection in comparative terms and try to understand how it was conceived in Greece and the ancient world: the picture that will emerge is rich and varied, and largely ignored by classical scholars and scholars of

Christianity in their opposing, reciprocal ignorance.[4] In the second sequence, after noting certain features of the resurrection in ancient and middle Judaism, I will look at how the New Testament presents Christ's resurrection and its resulting mediatory significance. The religious and experiential panorama that becomes visible once again holds not a few surprises since, as is the case, the texts transmitting the Easter event have been read from the viewpoint of later interpretations, which often see in them what they do *not* say, even indeed what they set out *not* to say. Christ's resurrection, understood as an experience resulting phenomenologically from the texts and not as a miraculous happening to be believed or disbelieved, not only opens up new perspectives on human history but shows itself as having methodological and philosophical implications as yet largely ignored and undeveloped.

Once again, Euripides, through the earliest of his works to survive, *Alcestis,* will be our guide in classical culture, together with the Orphic-Eleusinian tradition that provides the background, by analogy and contrast, to the birth and development of Greek tragic wisdom. We will thus have an opportunity to examine Euripides's ideas about religion and penetrate the lesser known, more secretly objectual aspects of spirituality in the ancient world.

## 2. The Resurrection of Alcestis

The most famous example of resurrection in ancient literature is to be found at the end of Euripides's *Alcestis,* when the heroine, the wife of Admetus, king of Pherae in Thessaly, returns in the flesh from beyond the grave after she had sacrificed herself to the gods of the underworld in order to save her husband's life. Euripides's tragedy provides proof, among other things, that classical Greece in any case had a notion of a return to life in the body after death, which gives the lie to the cliché that Greek culture conceived of the human being as essentially dualistic. But this calls for us carefully to reexamine how ancient civilizations viewed the matter.

It is symptomatic that Nicholas Thomas Wright in his study of the Resurrection, one of the most complete accounts to appear in recent years, minimizes the similarities between the stories of Alcestis and Christ, and in a way that is still anticomparative.[5] The Alcestis myth, he states, is an isolated case, was never a matter of belief for Euripides's audience, and never formed

part of a religious tradition. True, the *mythos* was never included in a set of beliefs backed by a cult with eschatological aspirations, but it makes little sense to put the question in that way, since in order to make the two perspectives comparable it assumes the Greek already possessed certain features of the Christian view, deemed by the interpreter to be essential beforehand. Instead, we need to understand the context in which the Alcestis *mythos* has its place, and the religious and ethical premises for its correct interpretation. It is, moreover, quite amazing that a study declaredly Christian in inspiration should completely ignore the motive for Alcestis's action, which earns her words of praise in Plato's *Symposium,* and that is her love for her husband. Certainly, it must be seen as part of the Hellenic vision of the family and relations between men and women, but it already shows us the link between sacrifice for love and physical rebirth after death.

In fact, this very theme of resurrection in the flesh is not as isolated and unconnected as Wright imagines. In the first place, the Alcestis myth was not Euripides's creation but belongs to the world of Greek mythology, and secondly, the story unfolds over religious terrain that had already been prepared, namely the Orphic-Eleusinian eschatology examined in the first volume of this study. Centering on the theme of the rebirth of the child Dionysus following his Titanic dismemberment, it was structured on belief in the salvation of the initiate's soul once released from the prison of the body. However, the idea of the re-membering of the body of Dionysus as a possible anticipation of Christ's resurrection would seem amply transcended and invalidated by the body/soul dualism attributed to Greek culture. Fortunately, as I have had occasion to say before, things appear far more complex and interesting than these schematic oppositions, once we examine them with unprejudiced eyes.

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First of all we ought to ask ourselves what was the nature of the body remembered by Dionysus's father Zeus, since there remains only the heart, which in the Mystery version is the phallus kept in the *cista mystica.* We do not even know what kind of body the pre-Titanic Dionysus had, since the detail is of no interest to the *mythos;* but since the child Dionysus is devoured we must infer that he had human physical characteristics. However, the physical nature of his body does not explain the Titans' action; rather, that action

refers to the implicit idea of a human body ready to be eaten raw. In any case, what is involved is not a biological body as we understand it but a sacred vitality taking in the various aspects of Greek *zoe,* from the ones closest to mankind to the divine ones: and here the reconstructions made by Kerényi show their relevance. This is the background to the subject of the *mythos,* the physical reconstitution of the post-Titanic Dionysus, a body the nature of which is most consistently explained as not material like the human body but tenuous or ethereal, and reconstituted through the fertilizing substance of the surviving phallus. We are accustomed to fixing details with scientific and descriptive logic, but their vagueness here is essential to the rite's effectiveness as a process of transformation. Quite visibly, there is a firm belief in a superior plane of an intermedial type, on which bodies can be reshaped and reborn, that has significant elements of continuity with the more tangibly material and earthly plane of the body.[6]

Ancient Egyptian eschatology attributed a similar intermedial bodily state to the dead and maintained close relations with Dionysianism on Crete and with Orphism.[7] In Egypt, the physical-sacramental guarantor for the transformation was the mummified corpse, its organs divided up in separate containers in a real dismemberment postmortem that replicated the dismemberment of Osiris; and to complete and direct the magical power contained in the body, complex magical-ritual arrangements were prescribed for every soul and spirit of the deceased. It was not the mummy that was reborn to eternal life, the Egyptians knowing full well it remained in the tomb: instead it was the insubstantial body that passed on to dwell among the gods thanks to the sacramental and intermediating apparatus established by the burial procedures.

To look at resurrection in the ancient world and overlook these performative and imaginal visions has little value since such beliefs clearly constituted the very definition of bodily existence and life for the various cultures: it is impossible to speak of rebirth in the flesh and ignore what the body meant to the civilization and period under review. Within those limits it is correct and indeed necessary to speak of resurrection, understood as the transition from earthly life to another superior, transformed existence, marking the objectual victory over destructive forces that threaten the community far more than the individual. But that does not mean we can nonchalantly talk of resurrection without first determining on every occasion exactly what

it signifies for a specific civilization, since we are confronted by a broad range of phenomena that can be traced to a common denominator, where it is not a question of a name but of a process and experience. First, the Christian resurrection, besides being by no means unrelated to the intermedial concept of antiquity, is not referred to by a single term, though the Greek *anastasis* tends to prevail; and it indicates a type of experience and state demonstrating the complete Christological title of the risen mediator.

Returning now to the intermedial and mediatory concept of the Greeks, and taking it as a specimen of a mentality attributable to the ancient world as a whole, with due allowance for differences and nuances, we can state that the gods themselves are endowed with an ethereal existence, generally conceived as eternal or, in the philosophical theories of *physis,* as existing as long as the *kosmos.*[8] And their existence interacts in a variety of ways with the physical life of man, essentially because the material terrestrial plane constantly needs influences coming from the intermedial sphere through which, just as the tenuous divine bodies can assume a human semblance by temporarily taking over some earthly human body material, human physical bodies can give rise to a more tenuous existence, normally on another cosmic and metaphysical plane but capable of taking bodily form once more. This allows me to go back to the question of Greek dualism in contrast to Christian anthropological unitarism, a question too often misunderstood, which indeed has become a convenient way to be rid of an issue one would rather not face.

So-called Platonic dualism, always cited as the major example in this regard, consists in distinguishing the spiritual, immortal principle of the soul as differing in essence from the transitory, corruptible body; but what is overlooked is that, from Plato's point of view, this conceptual, ontological clarification finally makes it possible to have a proper idea of their *relationship,* that is, of the dimension of exchange and participation that sustains the entire *kosmos,* defining what I have defined as the totality of Being, of what-is. In this perspective, unlike what Martha Craven Nussbaum asserts,[9] there is no real contradiction between the still contrastive framework of the *Phaedo,* where the aim is to free the spirituality of the soul from the magical-ritual materiality of the tradition, the intermediating function of *eros* developed in the *Symposium,* and the ascensional vision of the *Phaedrus,* with its understanding of the relationship between the passional-desiderative element and the spiritual element. The real *logos* about the soul, which is a *dialogos* initiated

with it, assists the soul in identifying its real mediatory ascendents, attainable through the right intermedial forces—chief among them *eros*—but this suggests a very different perspective from the antinomic dualism automatically attributed to Plato. And in fact, once the soul principle has regained its independence, it is ready to enter another body, according to the *mythos* of Er recounted at the end of the *Republic,* and that means establishing a new body/soul relationship; then, providing the soul ascends through the various levels of reality having started off along the path to the Good, that relationship will take it to a vision of the highest plane, the plane of Ideas, and to establishing the right mediatory and intermedial relationship with the entire *kosmos,* as set out in the great cosmological dialogue of the *Timaeus.* There is, then, no dualism of an antinomian kind in Plato since, as he sees it, the world of Ideas is the totality of what-is, the only complete reality, while sensible reality is its consequence, certainly defective but completely retrievable once its incorruptible essence has been reached. Obviously, in Plato, we are presented with a complex speculative vision; however, if matters stand thus with the leading exponent of the dry, intransitive dualism that all lazy-minded commentators have attributed to him, there is all the more reason to exclude any automatic contrast with the eschatological conceptions of antiquity, taken as a many-faceted, flexible whole and founded on religious visions that in any case made intermediation the dynamic instrument of salvation. For Plato, as for any member of an ancient society, the sole source of energy for that intermediation to transmute and work effectively came from the performance of rites and sacrificial ritual.

Before talking about a more personally and individually defined resurrection, we ought to think of the eschatological dimension as a process of transformation and exchange, triggered by sacrifice, its ritual matrix, the purpose of which is to make death objectually conceivable, since it introduces the possibility of being saved and redeemed, which in extreme cases can become reversal and restoration. None of this is foreign to the Christian resurrection since, as a religious representation, it has antecedents in the Judaic resurrection and, to some extent, in the Mazdaic resurrection. All theological or exegetic purism is therefore to be strictly excluded, because Christianity's supreme event cannot be conceived as unique and unrelated, which its very significance as universal salvation excludes. What is called a miracle is such because it restores and makes fully recognizable something

already there; otherwise it would only be the incursion of an inhuman, alien transcendence. But now we will apply these ideas to interpret the *Alcestis* of Euripides.

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The *mythos* of Alcestis, as Euripides presents it, amply fills in the background to her gesture. In the Prologue Apollo himself explains how his father Zeus made him serve as a slave for a year in Admetus's household to punish him for the religious and cosmic disorder caused by his son, Asclepius, who had so far overreached himself as to use his healing powers to restore the dead to life. The theme of resurrection thus marks the start of events as a whole. To punish Asclepius Zeus strikes him down with a thunderbolt forged by the Cyclops, whom Apollo kills in revenge and is then punished in turn by his slavery under Admetus. It is not difficult to recognize a symbolic construction in these background events that is in part the result of Euripides's development, albeit based on traditional attitudes and beliefs.[10] It is to be noted that Asclepius's punishment appears symmetrical and opposite to the punishment of the Titans, and their collective function is reflected in the killing of the Cyclops by Apollo to avenge his son's death, an unmistakable example of mythic *variatio* through duplication and inversion: it is as if the cosmic order the Titans had violated in a destructive and violent sense were violated by Asclepius in a saving, reparative sense, and yet both violations are essential to the objectual configuration of the world, as long as they are subject to the punitive sanctions of Zeus, whose inscrutable cruelty, as in the *mythos* of Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound,* corresponds to the necessity for sacrificial destruction, the only guarantee for all rebirth from destruction. We are thus in a position to see that Greek cults are characterized not so much by forming a system of theologically defined and stated beliefs as by being primarily a system of transmutation and exchange, to be grasped in its overall transformative power. And it is precisely there that we are able to trace what there is of *praeparatio evangelica* in the religious attitude of Greece and the ancient world, understood neither invasively nor anachronistically.

Just as humanity could not have come into existence without the Titanic crime, so without the bold daring of Asclepius it could not hope for salvation from suffering and death, in an act of divine redemption hardly plausible in itself, yet always sought and invoked. An essentially benign aspect

to the divine exists then, but access to it can only be gained by crossing the uncertain and irreversible threshold of sacrificial destruction and death; and the punishment inflicted on Apollo, his term as slave to Admetus, serves to introduce the tragedy's story of salvation, to which Alcestis brings the one missing element, the objectuality of love. In a word, Euripides detects certain religious aspirations and themes present in his culture and brings them out into the open. Divine objectuality is a hidden presence throughout the play in the role of the slave, the most oppressed and objectually denied social role, a sign not only of the sympathy for slaves always shown by Euripides but also of the real tenor of his religious convictions, developed in the light of the most advanced philosophical ideas of the time. We have evidence of his friendship with Anaxagoras, while the influence of Socrates must be considered still more incisive and is illustrated by various anecdotes, which can be interpreted symbolically,[11] but emerges most clearly from the philosophical ideas underlying them.

Euripides tells us something about these intellectual and spiritual influences. According to the commentaries on the play, and thanks to his less disguised, more recognizable way of presenting things in *Alcestis* as compared to the tragedies of his full maturity, Euripides's own position is more openly revealed in the chorus's final speech before the denouement,[12] and adds a new and meaningful nuance to my principle of tragic impersonality, presented in the first volume, according to which the audience is involved, through the representation in the oppositional circle of the characters, without any direct intervention from the author:

I with the Muses
soared high in the sky
and clung to many thoughts [*logon*],
but none stronger than Necessity [*Anankas*]
I found, nor had I any remedy [*pharmakon*]
from the Thracian tablets
dictated by Orpheus,
nor from the drugs [*pharmaka*]
that to the Asclepians
Phoebus taught, to use against

the innumerable afflictions of mortals.
Of this goddess alone, neither to the altars
nor to the simulacra is it useful
975 to go, nor does she listen to sacrifices.

Euripides starts by considering the cultural mediations he had directed his attention to—poetry and philosophy—and these sapiential forms had taught him the power and inevitability of Ananke, the necessity that is destiny, transformed by philosophical knowledge into a universal physical principle but without really altering the Homeric vision of a *Moira* of death hanging over men and gods. This is immediately followed by the two most innovative *pharmaka* available to contemporary culture: Orphism and the cult of Asclepius. In *Alcestis,* Orphism refers to the Thracian element in Dionysian mythology, while the cult of Asclepius should not be understood as a mere symbol for the art of medicine but as a religious mediation intended to defend and restore human and corporeal objectuality starting with the practice of medicine, within strict limits fixed by Zeus in the name of Ananke. Poetry, philosophy, science, and religion all reveal the inevitability of this implacable goddess, proving the presence, at the very heart of the highest Hellenic mediations, of an ultimate intransitivity that reduces human hopes to nothing, and unexpectedly, with one of those semantic shifts that reward the close study of great texts, presents us with the core inspiration of Euripides's art and of tragedy in general. No sacrifice, no ritual reparation can satisfy such a pitiless divinity. This indirect confession in no way violates tragic impersonality, since the final speech of the chorus specifically confirms its embodiment of the impersonality of destiny, of a funeral mask brought down over the faces of human beings by the fundamental laws of existence, fitting perfectly over the theatrical masks that allow us to understand all there is to understand.

Thanks precisely to the contrastive focus of his disenchanted meditation, Euripides nevertheless continues in his efforts to explore the space for objectual restoration offered by the mythic material available to him, and uses the Alcestis *mythos* to stage *one* of the resurrections for which Asclepius was put to death. In this case the miracle is performed by Heracles who is said by tradition to have visited the underworld. His typical image as a muscular hero prepared to undertake labors of any kind gave Euripides the opportunity

to stress the difficult and improbable nature of the task in a serio-comic vein that also characterizes the opening dialogue between Apollo and Thanatos. Euripides derived these stylistic features from the satyr-play, a para-tragic genre treating the themes of tragedy in a semiserious, carnivalesque manner, and already in decline in the fifth century. The fact that they appear here is not entirely due to the position of *Alcestis* as the fourth piece in the 438 tetralogy, thus taking the place of the satyr-play, nor certainly does it mean Euripides wanted to avoid the seriousness of the subject to some extent.[13] From the very start his concern is to establish a register of reversal that never becomes parody since, having recognized the inexorable Ananke of death, it has to explore the margins of its reversibility. In the following sequence taken from the exodus, the veiled body of the resuscitated Alcestis has been carried on stage by Heracles who now shows it to her husband:

*Heracles* Look at her, does she not look like your wife?
Good fortune is yours, do not distress yourself.
*Admetus* O Gods, what shall I say?—it is an unhoped-for miracle [*thauma*]—this woman I see, is she really mine?
Or am I struck by illusory joy, sent by a god?
*Heracles* No, what you see is really your wife.
*Admetus* Look, it may be a phantom [*phasma*] from the under world.
*Heracles* I am your guest and no necromancer.
*Admetus* But do I really have before my eyes the woman I buried?
*Heracles* Certainly. I'm not surprised you can't believe in your good fortune.
*Admetus* Can I touch her, speak to her as if she were really my living wife?
*Heracles* Please do. You have everything you wished for.
*Admetus* O Face, O most beloved Body of my wife.
I have you against every hope, when I thought I would never see you again.
*Heracles* She is yours. And may the envy [*phthonos*] of the gods not fall on you.
*Admetus* Noble son of great Zeus,
may you be happy and may the Father who created you

protect you: you alone have straightened out my fate.
But how did you bring her back from the underworld up into the light [*es phaos*]?
*Heracles* I fought the lord of the demons [*daimonon*].
*Admetus* And where did this fight with Thanatos take place?
*Heracles* I stood by the tomb and seized him with my hands.
*Admetus* And why does this woman stay still and silent?
*Heracles* It is not lawful for you to hear her voice
before she is released from the bond that consecrates her
to the gods of the underworld, and before the third day [*phaos*] has come.

This scene has points of contact with the story of Christ that call for comment, avoiding however the undue simplifications superimposed by the comparativists as well as the anticomparativists' philologistic and theological exorcisms. Admetus's incredulity is one of the narrative details shared with the gospel story and might be compared to the initial disbelief of Jesus's disciples, besides having an obvious explanation in psychological and narrative terms. The period of three days that must elapse before Alcestis will be allowed to speak is still more interesting since its origin lies in myth and ritual; it is a typical ritual time-division and appears in the trieteric festivals as well. Considering that Alcestis will be able to say she has emerged from death only when she is no longer consecrated to the underworld gods and in a position to communicate with the living, this period of three days is fully comparable to the three days between Christ's death and his resurrection; and the parallel is confirmed by Euripides choosing the same word φάος to indicate the light of the living and the third day. But the chief resemblance lies in Alcestis sacrificing her life to save her husband, which has induced more than one commentator to see her as a *figura Christi.*[14] The convergence is certainly remarkable, and all the more striking when we note how frequently it happens in Euripides that a character heroically sacrifices his or her own life for the good of others, a theme powerfully developed in the last of his plays, *Iphigenia in Aulis.*

In the comparative evaluation of *Alcestis,* scholarly opinions range from intransitive differentiation to total assimilation, with both those positions being supported by elements in the text or absent from it. However, their

inadequacy becomes at once apparent when we realize that neither approach completely negates the other, nor succeeds in accounting for all aspects of the play. A more balanced interpretation will only be achieved by integrating the similarities and differences, and so retrieving the intermedial and ritual context I mentioned above.

Sacrificial substitution is a central theme in the play, since Alcestis decides to die in place of her husband who is facing imminent death as decreed by the Erinyes; and that is the most mysterious and disquieting aspect of Ananke, the one closest to mortals and a reminder of the price to be paid for any objectual safeguard, any achievement securing human life. And clearly Euripides took up this theme quite consciously since we are not told why Admetus has to die: according to Amy Marjorie Dale, the explanation presented by Apollodorus, that Artemis is angry because she had not been properly honored at the time of his wedding to Alcestis, is a later addition by the mythographer, and incompatible with Euripides's version in which the couple have been married for several years.[15] Dale's view that Euripides based himself on a popular legendary version is unsatisfactory, however, considering that the Prologue is otherwise etiologically accurate and most careful about the mythical-religious symbolism, which duly reappears in the exodus. This, together with the affection shown by the divine guest for Admetus, would suggest that the real underlying reason for his punishment is a structural bond between Admetus, on the one hand, and Apollo and Asclepius on the other, between man in need of salvation and two mythical saviors who still do not manage to save. However, before we ascertain the nature of that bond, we must see how Euripides exploits this margin of incompleteness and uncertainty between the characters and their functions.

The absence of explicit motives for condemning Admetus to death would suggest Euripides is using the mysterious indetermination of guilt in myth to open up the space of oscillation in which the drama is played out, and also to reflect on the even grimmer Necessity that sets human beings against each other in a sordid struggle for survival, so primitive that family ties and kinship mean nothing, as exemplified by the parents of Admetus when they refuse to sacrifice themselves for their son. His wife alone is willing to die for him, though her choice cannot really cancel out the logic of power abuse prevailing in the human world. She reminds her husband of his parents' behavior just before she dies, and is harshly critical:

290 they both betrayed you,
when at their age it would have been good to go,
good to save their son and die gloriously.

The attitude implicit in a comment of the sort obviously differs profoundly from Christian charity, and from Christ's sacrifice understood in its full significance. Alcestis subscribes fully not only to the rules of ancient rhetoric whereby characters were expected to state the objective reasons linked to their situation and social status,[16] but also to the sacrificial logic governing the episode, in a way comparable, though by no means identical, to Iphigenia in the *Iphigenia in Aulis* who agrees to sacrifice herself so that the Greeks can go to war against the barbarians. In the classical world the values of public decorum took precedence—the duties and magnanimous gestures befitting an individual's social status—though Alcestis adapts this requirement and makes it a gift of love that cannot be equated with the desperate gesture of a designated victim left with no alternative. To liken Alcestis to a pagan *figura Christi* while ignoring these cultural differences ends up by missing the real tenor of both the differences and the similarities.

Recognizing cultural otherness is not the end of the analysis but rather the right starting point from which the interpretation can move ahead again. The mechanism of sacrificial substitution is not an end in itself, limited to making someone else pay the price for cultural mediation and so turning it into a whited sepulcher raised over the bodies of dead victims; in other words, substitution is something of a brutal, violent introduction initiating a more extensive process that once it has begun opens the way to the object being achieved and thereby shows itself to be a transforming mediatory event. At this initial point substitution shows itself to be the intransitive interruption that through being shifted onto someone else starts an unforeseen miraculous transitivity, from which the world arises and rearises and the object offers itself. And so we discover that the whole drama of *Alcestis* revolves around this, namely, what remains of human objectuality once awareness creeps in, not so much an awareness of the inevitability of death, which would reduce the story to a banal naturalism quite foreign to the mentality of the ancient world, as an awareness of humanity's total involvement and complicity in regard to that destiny, made more bitter still by its supine dependence on the dynamics of substitution. The drama of *Alcestis* is this *mors tua vita mea* that

shows itself to be the unstated foundation of the objectual world everyone lives in and shares. This is the *mors immortalis* that contaminates existence and deprives life of zest and meaning, an a priori death casting a shadow of fate over everything. Alcestis's voluntary sacrifice, which Euripides acutely tells us was already decided at the start of the play, is precisely the choice she makes to pay the intolerable price of the transitivity of death, not just to save her husband's life but to ensure that the objectual significance should not disappear from his life as from other lives, offering an alternative to the ruthless logic of *mors tua vita mea* that threatens to empty all affective relationships from within and render them negligible, and therewith to undermine the very foundations of the entire objectual fabric of relationships and the world. In that sense it becomes justifiable to speak of Alcestis as a *figura Christi,* since her gesture has a part in the same problem and makes the offering of one's self for love the ultimate choice on which the ultimate objectual recovery of the human world depends.

In clarifying this point we have also gained the elements we need to gauge more exactly the distance separating the scene in *Alcestis* from the Christian resurrection. And actually it is their common background that enables us to see how the resurrectional experience in Christianity takes on a different meaning from the pagan resurrections, which are more comparable to the miracles of resuscitation attributed to Jesus in the Gospels that were intended to be signs anticipating what was to happen to him, but only by way of analogy. The resurrection of Christ does not appear as a resuscitation, a return to mortal life entailing the cessation of a future life, but as the acquisition of a definitive life that is both human and divine. This might seem to bring the Christic resurrection in line with incidents of rebirth into an immortal state ascribed to the gods of antiquity. However, their case is different in that their return to immortal life is not characterized as a historical, existentially verifiable event, as a reality that is entirely human because it is divine and authentically divine because absolutely human. There is always something personally indefinite and amazing/frightening about the rebirth of the ancient gods that excludes the human element, either crushing it or transfiguring and transferring it to an inaccessible reality, an unbreathable atmosphere. The space of indetermination and oscillation between one plane and the other predominates so that hope and despair are both possible at one and the same time, leaving the last word to

Destiny, to Necessity. In *Alcestis* Euripides brilliantly humanizes a process that would otherwise have the blurry and almost incomprehensible features of sacrificial theogonies, though some of their features still remain, and hamper the humanization from showing through in full force. By way of analogy, then, we have been able to recognize in all ancient expectations of objectual salvation certain points of contact with the resurrection of Christ, and ought now to register the difference between a religious achievement that is objectually complete, at least in principle, and its incomplete predecessors. The historical-religious phenomena of the Greek and Christic resurrections begin to reveal what they have in common and their differences, marking out a shared semantic area in which the specific nature of the Christian event is defined.

Alcestis is still a sort of simulacrum, satisfying her husband's wish to embrace her in the form of a statue "fashioned by the artist's skillful hand" (l. 348), but without overcoming or dissolving the dividing line between reality and illusion. When she is brought back to life on stage, she is veiled and so cannot be seen; and since not even her voice is allowed to be heard she remains silent, which gives her a sinister, ghostly air. Her apparition is influenced by the powerful, contaminating forces of the underworld and the sacred: a few lines earlier, when invited by Heracles to touch the unknown woman, Admetus says he does so as if he had to sever the Gorgon's head (l. 1118). This is an allusion to the blood of the Gorgon as used by Asclepius to raise the dead; however, the simile is overlaid with the horror of the monster that stands as a symbol for death never completely exorcised, and in the passage quoted above Admetus is afraid his wife could be a "phantom from the underworld" (l. 1127). And the confrontation at the start of *Alcestis,* between Heracles and Thanatos, the spirit of death, in a tussle typical of the satyr-plays, corresponds here to a struggle against magical-sacral forces, superior in themselves, in the concrete form of a demon engaged in fierce hand-to-hand combat. Nothing about this conflict suggests a triumph over death but rather constant ritual dealings with it that perpetuate its rule, its laws and prohibitions.

While it would be a mistake to overlook the presence in *Alcestis* of a yearning for salvation from death and lovelessness, which is reflected in the action of the play, it would be just as wrong to ignore the glaring differences between a text such as this and the Gospel accounts of the Resurrection. No

covering up will uncover the ultimate truth about the price paid in sacrifice for human mediations and about the real divine mediation that can deliver humanity from it. The Eleusinian mystery cult provides the closest analogy to the story told in *Alcestis,* and it was undoubtedly intended as such by Euripides. Initiates to the cult relived a complex experience of death and resurrection, starting with the episode of Demeter in search of her daughter Persephone, who had been abducted by Hades or Aidoneus, the god of the underworld, and culminating, in the reconstruction I follow, in the killing and rebirth of Dionysus. As they came to this climactic moment, initiates were veiled and had to keep silent about what they saw. The same veils appear in Parmenides's Proem when the Heliades take them off in the light of the sun, a gesture signifying the approach of the true *logos* of a Persephone, mistress no longer of the dead but of death itself, destroyed thanks to the discovery of the only timeless reality, *to eon*. An extraordinary solution, an authentic, definitive resurrection of thought and knowledge, and yet it is the legacy of the highest wisdom, and also remains outside the anxious, passionate world of Euripides's characters, a world where death continues to overwhelm and destroy irremediably, and Alcestis returns to life but preserves intact the mystery surrounding those who cross the threshold of the underworld.

The sacred injunction to silence fairly describes the personal and historical situation of Euripides, as writer and thinker. In his astonishing analysis of the dependence of human mediations on violence, this authentic Shakespeare of antiquity is able to recognize the violence behind even the loftiest displays of contemporary religiosity, such as Eleusis, as well as behind the need for salvation being expressed increasingly through the ancient symbolism of sacrificial rebirth. But Euripides has no alternative to the world he describes and belongs to, and in this respect is unable to fully attain to the biblical meaning of *figura Christi,* to an objectually alternative mediation, in this as in other works of his. And if that can be said of the most daring and advanced of the Greek tragedians, there is all the more reason for it to apply to the tragic corpus as a whole. Nevertheless it is possible to see a *figura Christi* by default and subtraction in this Alcestis, in the sense of a *praefiguratio* represented by what it would aspire to and yet does not define, as well as a *figura Christi* in her guiding objectual motivation, concretized as married love, a theme both personal and social. The partial nature of the prefiguration takes nothing

from its human truth; on the contrary it increases it, and its very insufficiency makes it a "pre-Christian intuition," in Simone Weil's understanding of the matter.[17]

Euripides's final tragedy, *Iphigenia in Aulis,* makes clear just how far this interpretive key takes us into the deepest, most vital nerve centers of Euripides's art and of ancient spirituality as a whole, without any religious bias. In this drama, the only character to remain outside the tragic circle of characters, who are united and divided by the same values of power and pride, is the old slave, who alone tries to save Agamemnon's daughter. Apparently of secondary importance he is effectively central and can be seen as the moral and symbolic function of his creator, now at the end of his career, and fully conscious of the inadequacy of the spiritual mediations he has been seeking and of the silence that must fall on his knowledge. It is possible, therefore, to see Euripides himself as a *figura Christi,* without objectual answers himself but all the more penetrating and touching for that,[18] giving the lie to those who would write him off thinking they possess the gospel answer. Which is not to diminish the specific nature of Christ's resurrection but to recognize in the similarity its difference, its universal uniqueness, so to speak.

Two thousand years later Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* brought to the stage another drama interpretable in resurrectional terms or, to be more precise, a theatrical epilogue in which a loving wife really comes back to life and to her husband. The play is an authentically figural reflection on love and faithfulness in marriage, and reveals systematic analogies with Euripides's *Alcestis,* while the full significance of the conclusion emerges only if related to the simplest and most profound meaning of the Christian resurrection.[19] The centrality of the theme of resurrection is shown by frequent references to death and burial, with a corresponding and not simply metaphorical identification of love with a permanent return to life. This comes out particularly clearly in the scene of amorous skirmishing between Florizel and Perdita, Hermione's repudiated daughter who is thought to be dead (hence the wordplay in her name on the Latin "lost" or "abandoned") by both Leontes and her mother. Florizel is the son of Leontes's brother, the king of Bohemia, who is accused by Leontes of having an affair with Hermione. The following lines come from that scene and are part of a description of the flowers she would like to use at the sheep-shearing feast:

*Perdita* O, these I lack,
To make you garlands of, and my sweet friend,
To strew him o'er and o'er.
*Florizel* What, like a corpse?
*Perdita* No, like a bank, for love to lie and play on;
Not like a corpse—or if, not to be buried,
But quick and in mine arms.[20]

Love *is* resurrection, and not as a figure of speech because for Shakespeare love is the humble, triumphant meaning of the Christian resurrection, a triumph movingly celebrated in the final scene of *The Winter's Tale* where the analogy with Alcestis acquires a variety of meanings and comes to supply an essential background to my ideas. The Greek eschatological symbol of the meadow, connected to Persephone's abduction, is here transformed into a floral setting for amorous play, and even when the flowers call up ideas of death and burial those associations are emptied out like Christ's tomb, completely reversed to restore lovingkindness definitively. Many scholars automatically rule out *Alcestis* as a possible source for *The Winter's Tale* on the superficial basis that Shakespeare had no Greek, but he could in fact have had access to Euripides's play through Latin versions then available, as well as vernacular treatments of the same theme.[21] The analogies between *The Winter's Tale* and *Alcestis* must therefore be considered proven, restoring an essential dimension to our understanding of the profundity and poetry of the final scene in Shakespeare's play, in which thousands of years of artistic and religious thought are movingly condensed in a symbolic resolution. The difference between the ancient and the modern drama is that Alcestis is a living woman unable to get free of her appearance as a simulacrum, as a statue, while Hermione is a statue in appearance but in every respect shows herself to be a living woman, a faithful, loving wife who brings back the life of affective and family objectuality into the icy winter of objectual negation, of ill feeling incapable of trust or reciprocation.[22] In the interval between the two plays something important occurred that gave definitive content to humanity's eternal quest for objectuality.

However, this does not conclude the analysis of *Alcestis,* though some readers might think so in their eagerness to get to the Christian resurrection, mistakenly thinking that event so unique and new that in itself it obviates

all that came before and provides answers for all that came afterwards. Two essential steps have yet to be taken: first, we must go back to the comparison with the mythical-ritual dimension of archaic resurrections to examine their essential mediatory and intermedial content in depth, and to see more clearly the progress made by Euripides; and second we must garner some of the finer points of Euripides's art, in itself one of the most notable results of a civilization already amazing for its other spiritual and cultural achievements.

## 3. The Eternal Return of Persephone and the *Chance* of Hospitality

One thing we can safely say is that Euripides's sophisticated development of the Alcestis myth was not the irrelevant idiosyncratic outlier that the more extreme Christian apologists claim but belongs to a context as richly varied as it is unresolved and oscillating. Its most ancient strata can be observed if we take a closer look at a more ritual *mythos,* such as the story of Demeter and Persephone that brings to mind *The Magic Mountain* and the mother-and-daughter statuary in the Eleusinian edifice in Hans Castorp's vision. There is even an allusion to the myth in *The Winter's Tale:* just before the passage about flowers, Perdita exclaims: "O Proserpina, / for the flowers now, that frighted thou let'st fall / from Dis's waggon!"[23] So we shall also be able to examine the *mythos* behind the initiation scene in Parmenides's Proem.

Hades abducts Persephone while she is gathering narcissi, "the lovely toy" linked with death through its narcotic power,[24] and Perdita wants to have Proserpina's flowers for herself in order to reverse their fatal significance once and for all. The ancient myth also wants to reverse the association with death, but only according to the cycle of the seasons whereby flowers are reborn every spring. The story of Persephone is a *mythos* of death and rebirth that has specific links with Euripides's drama: in the first place through her myth's connections with Thessaly;[25] secondly because, in what is plausibly the oldest version of the myth, she sanctions her own return to the world of the living[26] so that Alcestis may be classified as her mythographic double; and finally, above all else, for the more general reason that the return of Alcestis among the living in any event follows and humanizes the objectual direction taken by the *mythos* of Demeter and her daughter,

and within a cyclical vision without which death in the ancient world was inconceivable.

Once the content of the Demeter-Persephone myth is taken seriously, the connection between the mythical figures of Persephone and Alcestis appears undeniable. Demeter is in such despair because her daughter is dead: this is the only possible meaning of her abduction by the divine king of the underworld and is corroborated by the metaphor of marriage to Hades used to indicate the premature death of a young woman. But we know from the ritual and mystery context of the story that such deaths in the distant past were not due to natural causes but to deliberate violence in the form of a ritual killing that represented sacred marriage to the god. In *Alcestis* Admetus's father alludes to this metaphor when he names the houses of Hades and bids farewell to his daughter-in-law, adding bluntly that "these are the marriages / that benefit mortals; otherwise, it's better not to get married" (ll. 627–28). The Titanic ritual in the Orphic-Eleusinian tradition corresponded to this female sacrifice; at Eleusis the sacrifice of a male child was reevoked, presumably in the form of an animal sacrifice, with the proclamation of his rebirth as its crowning moment. In the course of time these sacrifices became initiation ceremonies, the initiate taking the place of the victim who dies and is born again, an identification also found in ancient Egypt with Osiris but in a more otherworldly key. In conclusion, then, Persephone's *katabasis* and *anabasis,* her *kathodos* to and *anodos* from the realm of death, can be recognized as a mythical-ritual resurrection event and throws light on Parmenides's motives for making her the divine symbolic and narrative mediator of his own philosophy. The following passage from the most important text containing this myth, the pseudo-Homeric *Hymn to Demeter,* will serve to demonstrate this.

At this point in the hymn Demeter has found Persephone after much frantic searching. At first there is great joy, but we must never forget that this is all happening within the sphere of ancient resurrections, where the need for objectual salvation from death was expressed through the persistent, ominous symbolism of death itself. The passage begins as Demeter at last sees Persephone again:

385 The goddess, seeing her daughter,
hurled herself upon her, like a maenad over the darkly forested
mountain.

In her turn, Persephone, seeing her mother's lovely face,[27]
leaving the wagon and horses,
jumped down and threw her arms about her neck, holding her tight.
But immediately, while the goddess was still holding her daughter in her arms,
her heart [*thymos*] sensed a trick; she was seized by dark dread,
and breaking off her embraces, hurriedly asked her:
"Daughter, while down there, you didn't eat
any food surely? Speak, hide nothing from me, for us both to know.
If so, from loathed Hades returned,
with me and your father, the son of Cronus in the black clouds
you may dwell, honored by all the immortals.
If instead you have eaten, you shall return to the depths of the earth
to dwell for one of the three parts of the year;
the other two, with me and the immortals.
Each time the earth is carpeted with the fragrant,
many-colored flowers of spring, then from the dark shadows
you shall arise [*anei*] again, great wonder [*mega thauma*] of the gods and mortals."[28]

These lines are a compendium of mythological and ritual allusions. However, the first feature to note is the partial and specious nature of Demeter's happiness: after the first joyful embrace she at once senses some kind of deception and is actually seized by "dark dread." The final verb at the end ἄνει comes from *aniemi,* which indicates a reascending movement (*ano*) but can also convey other meanings, such as to let go, to consecrate, and even to flay; here in a strict sense it expresses the conditioned, reversible nature of this return, which is connected to a previous transformation. The scene in *Alcestis* is similarly ambiguous, but the archaic connotation here makes the ambiguity more disturbing. The detail of the food eaten in Hades plays an essential role, whatever it means, since it corresponds to an irreversible change of a magical kind, an intransitive passage that guarantees the future transitions.

This detail recalls primarily the food given to the dead at the time of burial and either placed in the tombs or poured in through holes and channels made for the purpose. Demeter suspects what has actually happened and

that Persephone has eaten a pomegranate seed, a fruit that symbolized death in ancient times. But this symbolic swallowing does not smack of fable or folklore since it refers to the ceremony of burial, leaving hints as to how it was arrived at. In this respect the first verses are revealing, with their comparison of Demeter to a maenad running "over the darkly forested mountain" in a rite impressively evoked in the *Bacchae*, the *oreibasia,*[29] in which the maenads roamed over the mountains carrying out the most primitive sacrifice, the *sparagmos.* The pomegranate also refers to preparations of vegetable origin used in the rite; probably these were psychotropic substances consumed by the Dionysian group, the *thiasos,* to help it reach the requisite state of wild ecstatic abandon. One conjecture worth considering is that a fermented drink was used that had something in common with the pomegranate; the phrase "sweet as honey" (l. 372) describing the seed eaten by Persephone would support the conjecture and could be an allusion to hydromel, the fermented drink linked to the gathering of wild honey in Paleolithic times and later replaced by wine. But without excluding this hypothesis, there is another one more specific and supported by archaeological evidence, which is that the pomegranate alludes to the use of opium in Mother Goddess rites on Crete that then passed on to Eleusis.[30] The poppy seedpod depicted in illustrations of the Mother Goddess cult was called *rhoias,* which is almost identical to the word for pomegranate, *rhoa* (the Homeric hymn has *rhoia*) through the evident similarity in their shape. In the Persephone episode there are traces of the ritual use of opium, perhaps administered to alleviate the victim's sufferings as the participants in the rite set about killing him/her, while they themselves were under the effects of the same drug or of alcoholic drinks such as hydromel. The connection between mythical-ritual rebirth and the state of savage frenzy the group had to reach through mimetic contagion, drugs and alcohol, is striking: it was possible to experience the objectual restoration of life only by reliving the drama of its destruction, by repeating its mystery through the controlled excesses and mysterious necessity of the ritual.

The *Hymn to Demeter* represents the transformed, narrative version of a very ancient rite, reconstructable in a form whose overall meaning is clear though the details can only be hypothetical. Thus we revisit the Dionysian sacrifice from a feminine point of view, which the interplay of disguise and transformation among men and women in the *Bacchae* both documents and prevents us from thoroughly exploring given the tradition that only men

could play on stage; and although Parmenides's poem is superior in ontological and cosmic terms, it does not permit us to go deeply into the matter since that would contravene the goddess's ban on taking nonbeing as real. In this case, a girl was dismembered by a group possessed by the god as a result of intoxication induced by opium and/or hydromel—it may have been a group of women, but the use of drugs and alcohol suggests a male group as more probable—and the body was then reassembled and buried as a sign of her propitiatory rebirth. The strongly archaic features and the fact that the rite is not found in ancient Greece in this particular version indicate that the event's substratum dates from pre-Hellenic prehistory. Two phases can be identified within the substratum: a neolithic phase when agriculture was introduced leading to developments in the use of fermented drinks and psychotropic plants (the poppy is associated with cereal cultivation), though their usage went back to the earlier gathering of wild plants; and a more ancient paleolithic phase when sacrifice took the more savage form of omophagy, revisited in the Orphic version of the myth of Dionysus. So what conclusions are we to draw from this analysis?

The compulsory nature of Persephone's return-rebirth—she will have to divide the year into three parts and spend one of them as the companion of Hades ("you shall return to the depths of the earth / to dwell for one of the three parts of the year")—is its most striking feature and throws light on the archaic origin of Alcestis's return to life, which shares a similar trinary symbolism with it because of her compulsory return to the world of the living not "before the third day has come." Persephone's periodic revival corresponds to the cyclical return of the sacrificial rite. The explanation of sacrifice is not given by its connection with the rhythms of the seasons and vegetation, as Frazer believed,[31] but, on the contrary, the ritual cycles provided a framework for defining and interpreting the cycles of nature. They interacted and reinforced one another, but that must not lead us to forget the cultual and cultural origin of their symbiosis. The *Hymn to Demeter,* in its theological and logical construction, rules out any sort of naturalism. Demeter's speech is the consequence of ritual acts that are in her divine custodianship and is structured symbolically: the "black clouds" of Zeus, the happy home promised to Persephone had she not eaten the food of Hades, are equivalent to the "depths of the earth" and "dark shadows," that is, of the *kathodos* from which she shall arise each year to ascend into the *anodos* because she has eaten of

the fruit. Zeus and Hades correspond to a single divine figure, emphasized by the two gods being brothers, varying slightly here from Heraclitus who states that Dionysus and Hades are a single divinity, and always hungry for fresh sacrificial victims.

Demeter knows everything because she is the divine mediator of a rite that was essential to the community, and probably performed by a priestess representing or incarnating her: the goddess corresponds to a priestly figure who could preside over the selection and execution of the virgin consecrated to Hades but, in the final analysis, was a double of the victim, since Persephone has taken her place. The "great wonder" (*mega thauma*) that Persephone will be for humanity at each cyclical rebirth, the *thauma* of the return of Alcestis that is like a miracle for Admetus, is prior to the rebirths of nature, since it represents the divine mediation that made the very idea of nature conceivable. What guarantees the objectual representation of the natural world spoken of in the *mythos* is the duplication and regular repeating of Demeter and Persephone, and this has importance for the cognitive implications of their ritual mediation.

In Parmenides the doubling of Demeter and Persephone becomes a single factor once more, with the added subtlety of refracted images of female divinities that emphasizes their real significance as different and inseparable reflections of a single ontological complex, in a *reductio ad unum,* in an atonement, that transforms the Dionysian procedure of dismemberment becoming remembrance and re-membering into the question of the One and the Many, definitively resolved by making the Many the permanent manifestation of the One. However, the resurrection of knowledge and truth proposed by Parmenides, and expounded by the divinity herself who represented it in a shadowy and still deceptive way, cannot completely break away from the cyclical prefix of the ritual processes it stems from and fails to be a permanent arising without the inconstant "re-" before it. What hampers this magnificent ontological atonement is, as always, the incomprehension of bicephalous humans, ever ready to kill and tear someone to pieces in their agonizing oscillations between one head and the other, between the being they cling to and the nonbeing from which they do not know how to free it. In its compactness, Parmenides's solution provided no answers to the anthropological and historical questions that Greek civilization was becoming aware of; however, it left a legacy in the need for complete objectual

salvation through *logos,* which was to be the soul of later philosophy and, in terms of theology regarding incarnation, is met with again in the *Logos* of John.

Philosophy, according to both Plato and Aristotle, arose from the *thauma* that was Persephone, from the sense of wonder at her return from the realm of death, revoked as often as it was repeated. They refer to *thaumazein,* which is not the open-mouthed amazement at the sight of natural wonders so dear to nineteenth-century historians; instead it can be traced back, via the ecstatic experience of the rite transformed into *theoria* of *physis* by the pre-Socratics, to the collective contemplation of a god reborn from his violent death, becoming as a result the establisher of order in the world, the source of all interpretations of the world, and ultimately the ideal of a final mediation of the world through knowledge. The partly abstract nature of this ideal, its inability to provide a complete answer to the existential anxiety apparent in *Alcestis,* was to find an answer in the compendious fullness of the Christian experience. From ancient Egypt to the Magna Grecia of Parmenides and then to Dante's Florence, the entire course of Western civilization over the millennia can in fact be traced through the repeated gesture of divine mediators who take humanity by the hand "with a joyful face" (con lieto volto) and make it understand there is nothing to fear beyond the grave, if it will let itself be guided.[32]

Thinking of his own knowledge, Parmenides is firmly convinced that the totality of what-is (*to eon*), which for Plato would be the world of Ideas and for Aristotle Being (*to on* understood by then as *to einai*), is deathless because it is completely compact in itself and assigned to its full existence where change and death are only apparent. Dante, on the other hand, thinks of redemption through the risen Christ who descended and still descends into hell to free those who call on him and return his love, and so shows himself to be the God who created "the great sea of Being" (lo gran mar de l'Essere) from nothing.[33] The objectual progress between the two modes of thinking is obvious, and sacrificial mediation is the mortal, vital key to it: invisible, ineffable sacrifice, the *arrheton* in Parmenides that goes back to a virgin sacrificed in honor of a nameless goddess, transformed into his knowledge of "is," of what-is, that obviates the need to repeat sacrifice thanks to knowledge capable of unmasking the deception; and sacrifice accepted and surpassed in Christianity and in Dante, where it is transformed into a historical and

metaphysical event showing that the secret, the essence of Being lies in love, capable of restoring it in the very act of denying it. Far from invalidating all preceding Greek philosophy, the objectual advance of Christian knowledge brought its fulfillment and, historically, released its cognitive potential in freedom of thought, long before social and legal freedom, which led to the daring experiments of modern philosophy and science, as exemplified by the Parmenidean legacy recognizable in the conceptions of Spinoza and Einstein and the studies on human origin on which I have liberally drawn through the course of this inquiry.[34] The reference to *thauma,* the sense of wonder the Greeks saw as the origin of philosophy, confirms the fact that sacrificial resurrection, understood as objectual revival coming from the experience of destruction, is at the origin of thought and language. And that is a further reason, not one less, for seeing the role of philosophy's cultural mediation. But there is more to Euripides's researches than a mediation he cannot entirely find.

We may have traced the ancestral roots of Alcestis's resurrection, but that is no reason for us to dismiss the question of its meaning as defined and settled; and we realize this at once from the fact that Euripides has deliberately replaced the ancient explanation for Alcestis's salvation, as conceded by Persephone, with the heroic, human action of Heracles who intervenes at the behest of the god Apollo.[35] The drama gains its depth and substance in retroacting with previous history and prehistory, opening up new objectual horizons through the interaction of elements apparently closed on themselves, such as the experience of passing from the realm of the living to the realm of the dead, the reverse of which is the dream of a world increasingly conscious of the individual nature of death and aware that the barrier between the living and the dead is not to be violated with impunity. This is exemplified in the myth of the death of Asclepius, killed by Zeus moreover, that is to say by the god who brings his own son back to life after the Titans kill him. A potential way out of the labyrinthine oscillations of the mythical-ritual world exposed in *Alcestis* is indicated by Euripides, and it enables us to grasp the secret but evident link between Admetus and Apollo, and between Admetus and Heracles whose labor here is most improbable and demanding. That link is *hospitality,* offered by Admetus unconsciously to Apollo and consciously to Heracles, at a cost to himself of concealing the inconsolable grief of his bereavement in order to honor Heracles properly; and in grateful

recognition of this Heracles in turn is roused to undertake the final fight against Thanatos.

Hospitality introduces the factor of gratuitousness into the ancient world's otherwise closed system of social and interpersonal relations, although, as an institution, hospitality is part of the regulated system of exchanges between different groups in which every concession must have a corresponding counterconcession in the course of time and so maintain a dynamic, creative balance in the system. But concentrating exclusively on the element of balance in this system with Lévi-Strauss loses sight of the most extreme and productive possibility, which was identified by Bataille, that an excess corresponding entirely to the destructive irreversibility of sacrifice might go in the direction of potlatch, the ritual of exchanging gifts whatever the cost that ends in neurotic and fatal competition, or else the direction of gratuitous expenditure asking nothing in return, so creating a liberating short-circuit between total renunciation of sacrifice and its objectual finality, its goal of reconstituting and guaranteeing the object. In that way man realizes his *chance,* his potential, and asserts his superiority to the things around him, and to the iron grip of necessity on which he depends, but which melts away at the precise, ineffaceable instant he renounces the greatest good receiving nothing in return, and thereby asserts the infinite value of his freedom and of a freely chosen bond with other people.

Hospitality in *Alcestis* appears as a minute fault-line in the dominion of Ananke, but it goes deep and its generous gratuitousness is superior to the blood ties of *genos* and the mean logic of giving in order to receive, most depressingly expressed in the behavior of Admetus's parents. In place of those ties we find others, less visible but infinitely stronger and more authentic, the ties of love and friendship. Alcestis's sacrifice of herself for her husband takes this alternative altruistic logic to an extreme, but it is this extreme that makes the most inconceivable reversibility not impossible, and prompts Heracles to reciprocate Admetus's friendly thoughtfulness with a gift so great that it breaks the enchanted circle of reciprocity, introducing the gratuitous register of gratitude and love. This glows like a bright spark in a dark world otherwise under the yoke of Ananke and the ruthless logic of sacrifice from which none of Euripides's characters can escape, not even Alcestis. As a result her resuscitation maintains the ambivalence and unclassifiable nature of an objectual goal that is desired but not possessed, of a reconstitution that has

been outlined but remains unimplemented. And yet a goal is clearly stated, and it helps us to understand how there came to be established in Israel, and partly as a result of the influence of Greek tragedy and philosophy, the notion of a God who exercised sovereignty through showing mercy, continually renewing hospitality to his people, a notion that was to become the desire for salvation of humanity as a whole.

We now have the comparative elements for arriving at a closer, more historically aware analysis of Christ's resurrection, an event whose centrality and true magnitude cannot be appreciated if we ignore the inconspicuous yet vital links, discernable on their own before any interpretive intrusion, with the finest components of classical culture, since those links are defined against the religious background common to Mediterranean and Near Eastern civilizations not to mention others. There is a type of comparitivism that rather than diminishing the significance of cultures, enhances their specific value, highlighting the peculiar creativeness of each culture on the basis of common problems and data, which may be present due to exchanges and influences but arise originally from a still earlier collective experience of the birth and destruction of the human objectual world and of the search for mediatory factors to make it imperishable. The originality of Christ's resurrection is shown by nothing more clearly than by the common ground shared with other religious experiences; and nothing more clearly than that originality shows what Christ's resurrection has in common with all human experience.

We must at least mention another no less essential step, directly relevant since it concerns the Jewish notion of resurrection characteristic of Middle Judaism, and shared by Jesus himself. I shall make only a few remarks here, to show at least how dense the pattern of relationships is—both analogies and differences—and thereby set Christ's resurrection into greater relief against this background.

## 4. Middle-Judaic Resurrections

The idea of resurrection established itself in postexilic Judaism as a collective rebirth of the chosen people that saw the objectuality of its divine destiny confirmed in the mercy shown by its sole and universal Mediator who had

made it suffer the depths of exile, defeat, and death, and finally raised it to a condition of permanent salvation. We need to keep certain points in mind or we will miss the peculiar features of the Middle-Judaic resurrection, in particular its controversial status among the different Jewish religious groups and its wide range of variations and uncertainties.[36] Nevertheless, some tendencies are recognizable. First, the collective character, showing us how resurrection came to be included in the corpus of theology of the covenant with Yahweh (therefore based on precise rules that the Israelites had to follow), but received above all an eschatological, future-oriented development, according to what some scholars call the theology of the promise:[37] rather than the concern of Israelites about their individual destiny after death, what matters is the objectual restoration of Israel as the chosen people, with an intermediate stage of preresurrection immortality. From this perspective, there is not the total contradiction, as we see it, between the belief in resurrection characteristic of the theology of the Pharisees and of other sects in Jesus's time, and the rejection of immortality and resurrection that according to the evidence, characterized the Sadducees, that is, the party of the Temple priests. Belief in the immortality/resurrection of the chosen people as a whole, in a future that became the temporal, eschatological equivalent of the Promised Land, meant believing that Yahweh would finally come to rule supreme against the pagan dominion, which inevitably acquired a political coloring, so that in the eyes of the Sadducees rejection of resurrection and loyalty to the Roman masters amounted to one and the same thing.

The religious and eschatological beliefs of the Temple priests in the first century remain a mystery, not only because the priests disbanded after the destruction of the Temple in 70 but also on account of the strict censorship protecting all archaic survivals of the cult. Consequently, the critical view taken of the expulsion of the merchants from the Temple in the gospel accounts and traditions remains one of the very few significant pieces of evidence about the cult, albeit with all the textual and theological complications we have already explored. There were certainly different positions within it, from various ideas of compromise with other Judaic factions, not openly secessionist like the Qumran community, to politically cynical behavior, much in evidence in the history of the Middle-Judaic period and confirmed by John, and even materialistic unbelief influenced by Greek philosophy, according to Garbini's conjecture that part of the priestly class consisted

of convinced Epicureans.[38] The existence in Jesus's time of a veil separating the worlds of the living and the dead is confirmed by the statement in the synoptic Gospels that the veil of the "sanctuary" (*naou*) was rent "from top to bottom" (ἀπ'ἄνωθεν ἕως κάτω—Mt 27:51; Mk 15:38) at the exact moment when Jesus died. Evidently this detail was credible to the Jewish public that Matthew especially had in mind, and obviously even after 70 it could *draw* on memories and personal knowledge of the Temple cult. It is highly significant that in Matthew the rending of the veil of the sanctuary causes an earthquake splitting the underlying rock and is almost automatically equivalent to the opening of the tombs and resurrection "of many saints who were asleep there" (27:51–52). Linking the two events, the shattering of the rocks and the rending of the veil, serves to indicate a single event, the end of the old Judaic separation of the worlds of the living and the dead, and signifies the advent of a new era in which the God of the living that Jesus talked about manifests himself fully against the old cult and its God of the dead. The expression *ap'anothen heos kato* transforms the event into a cosmic event and subverts the very structure of the creatural, human *kosmos* that bears the mark of its original sin and consequently needs to be separated apotropaically from a sacred and divine world that it feels is punitive and hostile.

Before returning shortly to the concept of the resurrection in Matthew, we can glean the information it has to offer about the Temple cult. The cult was conceived as a border force to keep watch over a sacred barrier that would otherwise have threatened the world of the living, and in one way or another, it was in the hands of the priests, who were part of an immense propitiatory cult, carried out effectively through the machinery of sacrifice initially created for the monarch and his human substitute victims who had to repeat Yahweh's journey into the next world.[39] This is the only way to explain how the Temple cult could continue for hundreds of years in spite of the indelible memory of the murder of David's legitimate descendent. If it had been of great theological merit and already monotheistic, as conventional reconstructions claim, it could hardly have survived such profanation; at the very least, the Cainite and anti-Cainite clergy would not have reached the compromise that ensured its future. All this assumes that the Sadducees in Jesus's time believed in Sheol as a dark and sinister place of the dead that the living had to be preserved from, and that its sacrificial propitiation could ensure a prosperous fulfilled life in society, according to

a religious order well accepted by the people, since it was deeply rooted in Israel's earliest history, and in itself compatible with the manipulative, even skeptical, attitudes of individuals within the ruling class that benefited from it. The theologico-political strands in postexilic Judaism and the complications and conflicts of Middle Judaism came to be grafted onto this solid basis of tradition, sanctioned by political power and backed by a long collectively shared history, producing its distinctively vast array of positions and promoting an uneasy coexistence between groups that had various reasons for accepting the cultual preeminence of the Temple. This explains how the idea of the collective salvation of the people of Yahweh could be reached through substantially maintaining the practices and beliefs of ancient Judaism. The non-Sadducean factions in Middle Judaism did no more than radicalize the hopes of objectual fulfillment that were already collective in character since their background was national, while the aspect of worldly success remained an essential ingredient. Israel's apparently atrophied eschatology underwent a revival, seeing that it really existed already as nonspiritualized objectuality linked to the monarchy and its priestly continuators in the Second Temple, and only acquired thematic focus under the powerful pressure of the victorious monarchic mediations that gradually subjugated Israel.

The repercussions of surrounding religions on Judaic eschatology were felt in two main phases, which are each structured and stratified. In the first phase the religious and cultural influence absorbed during exile in the great melting-pot of Babylon was grafted onto earlier traces of Egyptian and Assyrian origin as well as local elements, which explains how it is that Ezekiel 37, dating from that time, could use symbolism that is already as much proto-resurrectional as it is collective to express the hope for a return to the Promised Land, with the image of dry bones re-forming as skeletons and rising again to a new life in the flesh, and so finally completing Yahweh's plan of salvation. In the second phase, clearly attested in the late Hellenistic period but actually going back to the time of Persian rule, Judaism came under the influence of Mazdaism, another great religion of the henotheistic type. Its theology is never far removed from the profusion of gods and divine forces typical of all forms of henotheism and henolatry in antiquity, the god Ahura-Mazda being compatible with a variety of forms or divine emanations, each endowed with its specialized attributes and operations; and that, together with the power ensured by the imperial mediation of the Great King, is what

enabled Mazdaism to interact powerfully with Yahwistic henotheism. Subsequently the influence of Hellenism brought a more openly monotheistic and spiritual tone to this new religious development.

Hints of resurrection were certainly present in the sacrificial cult of ancient Judaism, but they were censored and transformed into politico-religious metaphors by Ezekiel's reform; now, under the Persian influence, they were exploited and developed, releasing their potential for objectual reconstitution, and allaying the fear of a return to the earlier sacrificial metamorphoses that had proved ineffectual in ensuring the collective salvation of the Jewish nation. And Mazdaism is probably responsible for the characteristic two-phase structure of Middle-Judaic eschatology that Christianity was to inherit; this envisaged an intermediate phase before resurrection, variously or vaguely defined as being spent in places of retribution for the soul's salvation or punishment, followed by a final Judgment when all were to arise once more to receive their reward or punishment, in bodily form as well.

Far from being a religious and cultic island, as many exegetes imagine, pre- and postexilic Judaism once again shows itself to have been formed and structured by an experience of religion and sacrifice similar in every way to that of neighboring religions, and to have developed by borrowing from and opposing the predominant cultures, a process that fully included Hellenistic culture in the Middle-Judaic period.[40] The fact that the two moments of opposition and assimilation were inseparably intertwined is confirmed by Israel having largely accepted the religious idea of resurrection immediately after rejecting its crudely sacrificial versions that were objectually incomplete or unstable in character which made their ritual reconfirmation necessary, and the outcome of this was an interpretation no longer directly linked to the transfiguring metamorphosis of the rite, at first by denying and concealing the metamorphosis, but with later ongoing revision that after the initial hesitancy and censoring became less materially intermedial and more spiritual. This spiritual reworking was anything but spiritualistic seeing that the belief of ancient civilizations in a magic origin still had its part in the Judaic resurrection, which thus depended on preserving bodily remains, especially the bones, the vital forces evidently remaining latent in the bones while the deceased waited for Yahweh to restore them to life.[41] At any rate, new horizons of thought were opened up in which the ancient, indefinite sacrificial revivals were linked to the idea of a mediatory and objectual reconstitution

of the Jewish nation with an absolutely eschatological accent while yet encapsulating the sense of an entire history ransomed and redeemed. And so we come to the beliefs in resurrection current in the time of Jesus, which he in an original way took up and fashioned in the direction of his own theology.

It is not easy to determine exactly what ideas about eschatology Jesus had in common with other strands in Middle Judaism. The Gospels contain repeated references to the Last Judgement that must have been historical, at least in inspiration, which would suggest an eschatology in two parts, with the advent of the Kingdom in two stages, the first introduced immediately by Jesus and the second definitively by the Father; besides anticipating and preparing for the advent of the Kingdom Jesus, as the Son of man, would also have assumed the role of judge. At all events, from the passages in the synoptics about the angelic condition of the risen dead we can reasonably infer that Jesus was thinking of a spiritual type of resurrection, where the accent should not fall on the casuistic details and idle curiosity that so annoyed him as he went about preaching the Kingdom but on the divinely mediated connotation of *angelos,* that is, of men and women finally reunited with their God and therefore restored to their true destiny within creation, in perfect continuity with their choosing to be part of the Kingdom on earth. And furthermore, some of the prophetic *logia* attributed to Jesus need complete rethinking since the post-Paschal additions of the New Testament writers might be limited, in some cases, to the resurrection as actually experienced by the disciples at Easter, specifying and completing information about Jesus formulated historically according to the eschatological *mundus imaginalis* of Middle Judaism.

The most keenly interesting feature is the spiritually mediatory and objectual significance acquired by Middle-Judaic eschatology in the teachings of Jesus, in whom the resurrection reflects the way the sovereignty of Yahweh acts, through responsibilization of the individual and loving reintegration that are characteristic of the Kingdom of God. And that is why the resurrection is equivalent to entering fully into his life-giving mediation, exactly as in the *logion* about the God of the living and not of the dead. The historical-collective aspect of Middle-Judaic resurrections is still present, not in the sense of demanding the kingdom of Israel in this world but as the definitive achievement of transcendent, incarnate sovereignty. Now the resurrection is no longer a future event, awaited as the theologico-political revanche of an

entire nation, but instead a process of objectual reconstitution, starting today and to be finally confirmed tomorrow, and not its event-based fulfillment. And all this accords with a divine plan in which the individual is no longer the only variable in a theological theorem conceived according to a collective logic: on the contrary, collective salvation now begins and ultimately ends with the individual, since it is made up of individuals who have freely subscribed to it, starting with that individual mediator who is the Son of man.

In Jesus, let us say, an emphasis on individual will and freedom that had already developed in Judaism found open expression, steering the Judaic mediations away from an archaic collective responsibility toward an internalized moral notion of guilt. However, this process was in danger of being undermined and lost in seeking territorial and politico-religious freedom from pagan domination, thus externalizing the covenant/promise with Yahweh that betrayed its most authentically objectual potential. This transformation of the Yahwistic mediation into a program of eschatological rebellion against Rome was a theological and historical blind alley as the disaster of the two Judaic wars proved, and it seems fair to add that the catastrophe might perhaps have been avoided if Jesus's spiritual reform had been accepted; at the same time, it was a catastrophe from out of which two major religious movements arose, Christianity and rabbinic Judaism.

One final paradox about Christ's resurrection needs to be brought out, which is that if we put it on a level with other Middle-Judaic representations its specific character, as an illuminating and decisive mediatory experience for the first followers of Jesus, is lost sight of. With this I am certainly not saying there is a residual difference that, once determined, would prove the divine provenance of Christ's resurrection but that the documentable phenomenological results of the resurrection make its peculiarity more clearly comprehensible, precisely in its close relationship to Middle-Judaic eschatology as revisited in the teachings of Jesus and in its more indirect but no less strategic relationship to the pagan resurrections. The significance of Christ's resurrection must have some connection with the religious and cultural representations of Jesus and his followers, otherwise it would be incomprehensible and inaccessible. At the same time, it cannot be entirely ascribed to them since, if it were, we would have a kind of theological mise-en-scène created by the willing belief of the disciples or at least a collective psychodrama in line with certain preconditions. Contrary to what these attempts

at rational explanation would lead us to think, we find again and again in all the New Testament accounts of the Resurrection an element of surprise, of the totally unexpected that is not to be rationalized according to schemes of precomprehension and expectations, preventing any well-meaning *quod erat demonstrandum,* which to the nonbeliever automatically sounds like a confutation. But that is the point: where the Resurrection is concerned the problem is not to demonstrate or confute but to bring out the phenomenological data that transmit it to us by making the texts speak, without preclusions or intrusions one way or the other. On this basis, within the comparative framework just outlined, we will attempt to interrogate the principal New Testament sources about the final event in Christ's mission.

## 5. Resurrection Strategies in Paul and the Synoptics

Having completed our comparatist analysis which alone enables us to contextualize and recognize the Christian resurrection without gross misunderstanding, we now must map out a methodological path to enter into the phenomenon. But we must first rid ourselves of the most widespread misconception about its historicity. Disappointingly, John Paul Meier's impressive study of the historical Jesus, a monument of intelligence and erudition on the subject, excludes from the start the Resurrection from its field of inquiry on the grounds that the event is a matter of faith not history.[42] He thus revives the phenomenal/noumenal split of the German Protestant researchers, Rudolf Bultmann in particular, that separated the Jesus of history, reconstructed according to the criteria of modern rationalism, from the Jesus of faith who, for Bultmann, is the Jesus of the *kerygma,* the central core of the theological message received by the first communities. In Bultmann's theology this central core is stripped in advance of all ties to contingent reality and passed over to the individual addressee, who is worldless and clings to his or her Christic savior with no hope of achievable mediation. It comes as no surprise that Bultmann regarded Christ's bodily resurrection as a *mythos* modeled on the Hellenistic mystery gods and above all "the Gnostic redemption myth";[43] on par with this, his Jesus is shorn of all things too closely Jewish and biblical, being deemed unworthy of Christ's existential *kerygma.* Such excesses were typical of the approach adopted in the twentieth-century

quest for Jesus even in Käsemann's revised and corrected version, and Meier avoids them, by rejecting on the one hand the bad habit of attributing to alleged Hellenistic accretions anything that is not accepted or understood about the historical Jesus and, on the other, by indefensibly detaching Jesus from the Judaic context to which he belonged. And yet without the final climactic summing-up of the Resurrection, his Jesus lacks the element of uniqueness that made him the nonarbitrary, inspirational figure of a movement destined to become a world religion within a matter of decades, and tends to fall back into a Judaic dimension that is as much aprioristic as it is generic, since Meier allows no credit to Hellenistic culture, and pays insufficient attention to the Judaic context in Jesus's time, since he perhaps too drastically excludes Rabbinic sources and above all makes too little use of the great wealth of Middle-Judaic literature, though this is precisely where we find, in all its drama, the vexed problem of how to secure Yahweh's mediation and identify the mediator of the Mediator.

A distinctive feature of the more recent quest for the historical Jesus is that it undervalues the most significant insights of the leading figures in the German research of the early twentieth century, not to mention David Friedrich Strauss, and fails to thoroughly examine its philosophical premises. Meier does not appreciate Bultmann's ability to perceive the theological datum within the exegetical datum which causes the latter to both contain and evidence a not inconsiderable residual part of the original religious phenomenon. In Bultmann, in fact, the Kantian and Protestant opposition of phenomenon to noumenon partly starts moving as a result of the tension Heidegger introduced between manifestation and concealment, whereby *something* of the foundation filters through within its historical phenomena and gives them life, even though it remains accessible only to a deworlded, dehistoricized religious faith. The kind of results to be obtained from a method inspired by Bultmann, but without his marked reluctance to accept the historical premises, are apparent in Philipp Seidensticker's study of the Resurrection.[44] The theological basis of his reconstructions is less selective and truncated, though controlled by premises that are too concordist in content and overlook the comparative religious context.[45] He therefore misses something of the true substance of the Resurrection texts and overemphasizes the communal factor in going back to the first resurrectional experiences in Galilee so as to consolidate the theological ground he has won, reducing the

appearances of the risen Christ to individual disciples to the status of "*experiences of a private nature*" (*Erlebnisberichten privater Art*):[46] a classification of the kind appears somewhat anachronistic in an ancient context such as that of Judaism and Christianity, but takes on a very different meaning and value if instead we recognize the acute concern shown by Jesus for the individual, offering him or her an essentially different experience of community membership, renewed once and for all by the mediation of the Kingdom. Nevertheless, some of Seidensticker's findings have considerable historical-critical value and, in my opinion, have not been adequately recognized in subsequent writings on the subject, while the work of Strauss continues to be ignored and, in accordance with the remorseless evolution of academic buzz-words and fashions, the best twentieth-century German research on the historical Jesus now tends to be dismissed as "inadequate" and "dated."

Decidedly more optimistic and confident is the study of Wright where the Resurrection is treated as a real, specific historical event firmly anchored to its Old Testament background and yet not coming within any religious category, being a unique event that only in its uniqueness guarantees everyone access to salvation. The post-Paschal accent in Wright is most pronounced in his comments on St. Paul, where he rightly stresses the central place of the Resurrection in the apostle's theology, and at every opportunity he is most emphatic about the corporeal nature of the Resurrection that took place in Christ and is promised to mankind. Undoubtedly his motive for doing this is to counter the tendency of more than a few theologians today to transform the Resurrection into a symbolic event, a theologoumenon ultimately representable at will. And here, despite the best of intentions, the defects of an enthusiastic, apologetic approach are only too plain; besides overlooking much of the critical progress in the intervening period, he completely ignores the ancient context of Judaic and Christian beliefs and flatly assumes that the Christian resurrection is totally unrelated to a Greek vision reduced to the cliché of Plato's alleged body/soul dualism. In that way Wright, and for that matter a vast portion of theological and exegetical literature, skips the entire intermedial vision of the classical world, largely inherited by the Middle Ages and the Renaissance; nor does he realize that what brought about the Reformation break with the Catholic Church was a waning belief in this vision and in the great spiritual and political mediations that held it together.

This inadequate sense of history leads to fundamental misunderstanding of Paul's ideas.

These excesses are instructive, showing how the Resurrection has become a sort of absurd theological chimaera, unclassifiable either according to modern rationalizations or to assertions that are traditional only on the surface, when the truth of the matter is that both approaches have lost the historical sense of what the tradition was, of how it worked. A strictly exegetic approach such as Brown's remains valuable and at least helps to penetrate the details of the texts even though it fails to restore its semantic spectrum entirely and, moreover, prudently draws back a little in respect to the results of Seidensticker's historical criticism.[47] The final impression is of general confusion among Christians as to their ideas about the Resurrection, passively reproducing the mediatory vacuum for which no remedy can be found simply because it is not even seen to be a problem. The cleverness and profundity of Euripides in retelling the resurrection of Alcestis becomes more credible by comparison.

Here, too, this embarrassing state of affairs is expressed most frankly by Strauss, in a remark made to a friend about his early dissertation, *De resurrectione carnis:* "I proved exegetically and by the philosophy of nature the resurrection of the dead, with complete conviction, and as I dotted the last *i* it was clear to me that there is nothing to the entire story."[48] We might add that the philosophical notion of myth, anticipated in the dissertation by a "philosophy of nature" that brings Schelling to mind, and chosen by the mature Strauss for want of a better, could hardly have produced very different results, not because it was inappropriate but because it lacked historical contextualization and therefore the possibility of developing into something better. As a consequence, the brilliant analyses of the gospel accounts of the Resurrection at the close of the *Life of Jesus,* which are always worth returning to if only to remind ourselves of the problem's textual aspects, fail to close the circle, not because they are too skeptical but because they fail to develop their skepticism into a genetic-comparative examination, from which the typical features and the original elements in the Christian source accounts would emerge proportionately more clearly. In trying to solve the riddle, Strauss finally came to explain the Resurrection as a subjective vision developed by the disciples after their return to Galilee when they felt ready to rethink and rework their traumatic experience utilizing the Bible texts

where divine election is linked to a destiny of persecution and death.[49] In itself this reconstruction is superior to quite a few of today's commentaries on the subject, but it already suffers from the subjectivism of a later date that presents Jesus in a romantic, liberal version. It appears symptomatic that it is here, at this precise point, that Strauss is unable to fully apply his model of myth as medium: although, on the one hand, his characteristic reading can to a certain extent explain the scene where the apostles are seized with enthusiasm after encountering their master, on the other hand this subjective mythopoeia is invalidated by the historical and objectual value the apostles always give to the encounter.

Strauss's final impasse also suggests the exact terms of the question that must be restored to a larger historical vision. We need to develop methodology so as to restate the problem without preemptively solving it since it is not a matter of solutions but of access, of finding points of entry exempt of the debris of cultural and historical disintegration we continue to ignore.

In regard to methodology and logic, then, there is no reason why we should not study the historicity of the Resurrection as *lived experience* (or rather living experience, in the sense of *Erlebnis*), as something that really happened to the disciples, rather than as a single event, about whose actual course the texts, on closer inspection, tell us surprisingly little or nothing. This is the first important point, but it is still too subjective on its own, too apparitionistic, considering that it is essential to understand the Resurrection as being itself a historical phenomenon, linked to the history of religions and at the same time possessing unique features that give it an accent and meaning unmistakably its own. There is an absolutely objectual dimension to the Resurrection that prevents it from coming entirely within either a subjective or an objective sphere: the first can easily become hallucination while the second is objectivistic, as if it were a purely empirical fact where the absence of eyewitness accounts is a cause either for regret or for emphasis. And here we come to a philosophically central step: to us the Resurrection appears as a historical phenomenon itself no different from any other, but it is precisely when it is assumed to be such that it reveals in itself a structure manifestative of what is human, making it the religious and historical *phainomenon* (φαινόμενον) par excellence, the inconspicuous, ubiquitous source of the modern notion of phenomenon itself. An observation of this sort cannot be demonstrated, but its truth can be given a chance to emerge

by examining material about the Resurrection that tells us everything we need but is careful to say nothing about the rest. We will start by defining this phenomenological nature constituting the resurrectional event from the viewpoint of testimony alone.

There are historical and textual arguments to exclude a hallucinatory-type perception and counter all attempts at psychological or sociological explanations that seek to debunk the resurrection phenomenon according to their own causal criteria.[50] The tone of the resurrection texts always evinces great control, in the way it includes essential empirical detail but eschews the inessential, a sign of theological thinking focused on history without being enslaved to it. The tone would be very different if a projective, representational type of explanation were what was actually involved, full of excited enthusiasm, and with the mythical exaggeration we do in fact find in apocryphal literature. And there is no lack of other telltale signs of a disorienting experience that does not quite fit the cultural classification criteria of the event's beneficiaries. The disciples' incredulity corresponds to Admetus's reaction on seeing his veiled wife, but there is a difference: this time the surprise is not linked to the ambiguous, elusive nature of a human being brought back to life from an unknown and potentially threatening sacral sphere. On the contrary, this encounter is a completely human and immediately accessible experience. So it is not the bewilderment itself that characterizes the event (as more wishful commentators mistakenly affirm) but its specific content that takes them by surprise and gives it absolute communicative, relational, and cognitive value and a fully objectual meaning.

Of peculiar importance, since it cannot be ascribed to any specific religious strategy, is the detail, found in all four Gospels, that the risen Christ is first announced or appears to his women followers before the others. Seidensticker's criterion for classifying experiences of a private nature has the merit of making it clear that these are part of the nucleus of historically founded experiences in Jerusalem, and are to be distinguished from the earlier collective Christophany of 1 Corinthians 15:6: "he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time,"[51] a Paschal event framed by individual manifestations that prove to be later additions. On the basis of the stratification and gradual tendency to redundancy and *amplificatio* apparent in the texts, Strauss had already shown that the resurrection encounters took place in Galilee, the region the disciples originally came from and to

which they probably had to return following the tragedy in Jerusalem, since the city environment then became thoroughly inhospitable and unsafe for them. The more complete and reliable historical-critical reconstruction of recent years has confirmed and consolidated Strauss's contribution. The sensational Christophany that Paul describes, which is also referred to in Mark 16:7 and Matthew 28:16, is said, or is supposed, to have taken place in Galilee according to Mark and Matthew, while Luke leaves only a vague hint (24:6), and the added chapter 21 of John directly preserves a Galilean tradition: the reason for all this insistence is that it constitutes the initial resurrection phenomenon, which was then combined with individual experiences in Jerusalem—primarily the encounter with Mary Magdalene,[52] whereas the Lucan episode of the two disciples meeting Jesus on the road to Emmaus has all the features of a symbolic narrative created by the evangelist[53]—together with group experiences, whose value is symbolic-figural unless they occurred in Galilee and were then transferred to Jerusalem for motives of theological and ecclesial validation. However, this does not prove individual experiences played a secondary role as Seidensticker maintains; in fact the origin of this type of encounter between women and the risen Christ is obviously historical and derives in all probability from one original model in the experience of Mary Magdalene, alone and by herself, that was subsequently multiplied, detached, and reduced.[54]

The criterion of embarrassment applies definitively to the strangeness of this female precedence. Woman's subordinate position in ancient societies took credibility and prestige away from accounts of the Resurrection issuing from the testimony of women, so much so that Matthew and Luke scale down the importance of their role compared to that of the disciples, especially Peter. A further complication was that Mary Magdalene met Christ by herself, whereas the Jews required at least two witnesses before accepting any testimony as valid proof, a difficulty that led to various additions and changes in the narratives. Nonetheless, all four Gospels contain this revealing detail of the precedence given to women in the form of angelophany and Christophany, and so it, too, is a fundamental element to a certain extent, even allowing for the angelic and Christic duplication that obviously came later as Strauss argued in his time. Some subsequent Gnostic interpretations place much emphasis on the role of the women and on Mary Magdalene in particular who is made the privileged recipient of the revelations of the

risen Christ and therefore of the gnosis. The emphasis was due in part to an anti-Petrine polemic, as was the prominence given to the role of James, the brother of the Lord, though there was also a historical basis for that. All this confirms the special relationship of Jesus's mission and message to women, to the safeguarding of the object that is the indispensable contribution of the female mediation, later glorified in the theological and creatural mediation of the mother of Christ.

But now I want to turn for a moment to the most singular aspect of the Resurrection accounts, already mentioned in relation to the Galilean nucleus of Christophany, which must be considered foundational at the ecclesial level: it is their conciseness and at times their total silence, due yet again to the use of sources originating in eyewitness accounts, which meant there could be no description of the resurrection of Jesus, first because there had been no witness to the event and secondly, but no less significantly, because of the atypical nature of the resurrection experience. For this reason, too, the conciseness or silence of the sources, what Seidensticker defines as "*the extraordinary scantiness* [ausserordentliche Dürftigkeit] *of the accounts regarding the Paschal events,*"[55] has fundamental theological implications that need thinking about. In this respect, all New Testament accounts of the event can be seen as proceeding by *subtraction* in one way or another, by what they do not say as much as by what they say, and even more so in a certain sense.

I will examine the accounts given by Paul, the synoptics, and the fourth Gospel, bearing in mind that the Gospels really contain not four but at least six accounts of the Resurrection, since the appearances of the risen Christ in Mark are described in the so-called *Appendix to Mark,* and John 21 was added to the original text by the so-called final editor. The Marcan *Appendix* is probably late and seems to be acquainted at least with Luke and John,[56] remaining thus secondary, whereas John 21 has very important material but falls within the Galilean tradition that for present purposes I am only considering in general. Therefore, for simplicity's sake I will refer to the main accounts and utilize only what is pertinent to my observations, leaving aside episodes in all probability based on resurrection experiences, such as the Transfiguration and the pericope of Jesus walking on the water. We will begin with Paul, whose testimony as already mentioned is the earliest and reflects his theological and personal ideas, in addition to his Jewish cultural and religious background.[57]

As Wright maintains, any commentary on the Resurrection in St. Paul, if it is to be adequate, must take the entire corpus of his letters into account, given that his encounter with the risen Christ is the fountainhead of his whole philosophy,[58] but his core testimony is set out in chapter 15 of 1 Corinthians where the main elements in his experience are summarized. This was already understood by Strauss who made it his *Ur-Text* for every historical reconstruction of the resurrection experience, which he interprets as a series of Christophanies analogous to Paul's experience on the road to Damascus.[59] However, the material transmitted by 1 Corinthians 15 is richer than this subjectivist reading.

The text is scant on narrative and circumstantial information but makes a wealth of personal and doctrinal points, which confirms it as conveying a historical kernel, variously expanded and finally developed according to Pauline doctrine. It includes the only explicit reflection in the New Testament on the nature of the risen body, clearly defined in intermedial and pneumatic/spiritual terms as a "spiritual body" (*soma pneumatikon:* 15:44).[60] For Paul, then, the Resurrection is the transformation of the somatic body, its characteristics preserved but in another dimension that goes beyond our experience of space-time and the body. However, it must be added that for Paul, as for all people in antiquity, the intermedial and pneumatic/spiritual dimension was hardly unrelated to the life experience of us all, constituting its underlying driving force and formative origin as well as its final destination. The Resurrection for Paul is the direct consequence of God's creative mediation, restoring through Jesus Christ the right objectual relationship with mankind and creation, and cancelling the sin of Adam which had interrupted it; and this transforming intervention to restore and regenerate takes place in fostering and bringing to fulfillment the spiritual substratum underlying all creation. Inevitably, the ontological-cosmic aspect of Paul's doctrine of the Resurrection seems remote to us today, when an intermedial view of the world certainly cannot be taken for granted; indeed, if it is to be regained, we shall need to historicize and humanize it. And to help us do just that, there is a most personal addition, the close of the resurrection confession at the beginning of chapter 15.

For us the most fascinating element in Paul's account is that he attributes the experience of an encounter with the risen Christ to himself last in his list, even though it is "as the aborted fetus (that I am)" (15:8), undoubtedly

referring to his conversion on the road to Damascus. Strauss was right to make the connection, but missed this difference: for a phenomenological-historical analysis it is not the point of arrival but the mediatory premise from which to start. Paul's severe self-denigration is a humble expression of heartfelt regret consequent on his previous persecution of Christ ("I am not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God": 15:9); however, this serves to exalt the omnipotence of God who has manifested his glory in Christ and transformed the entire existence of the persecutor, aborted on the level of God's creation but reborn to eternal life as a creature saved by Christ. We can now understand the incandescent core of Paul's transformational vocabulary, which otherwise might well leave us lukewarm and indifferent. His very unworthiness to be called apostle proves he is one, since it is Jesus Christ who has made him such and transformed him into the most instructive and repentant of the incarnate divine passives, so to speak, the children of God raised up again in spite of their sins which stand out in stark contrast as dark stains on which the divine mercy shines. And therefore to encounter the risen Christ is itself resurrection, entry into the saving spiritual reality that will be completed by Christ's final coming, and not a fulfillment detached from present history and life experience (*Erlebnis*). The apostle's message itself becomes part of this process of resurrection; it is the flowing tide of salvation with which he seeks to reach the rebellious community in Corinth that must embrace the same movement of death to resurrection, of sin to redemption. All Christian life, whether individual or collective, never ceases to be a matter of death and resurrection, and the fact that Paul thought a Parousia was at hand that did not materialize makes his theological thinking still more powerful in the end, eliminating the event-based aspect that fails to satisfy modern readers who no longer share that same expectation. Pushing Paul's thinking a little further in the same direction, we might add that the absence of the Parousia on the level of an event underscored the spiritual Parousia, which the Gospel of John was to stress. In the end it all adds up, and in arriving at this point we have come by a far more interesting route than any that could be offered by a commentary unaware of the immense historical-cultural complications that separate us from Paul's text.

The Gospel of Mark appears to be the most disappointing text in regard to the Resurrection but is the most surprising if we take a positive view of

the abrupt ending of the original text. The authentic Gospel in fact ends at 16:8, with the angel's simple announcement to the women and their frightened reaction (*ephobounto:* they were afraid).[61] This leaves readers high and dry, and so forces them to seek the significance of the angel's words in what happened before and in their own reactions. In other words, to know the Resurrection, readers are not only sent back to Galilee where the Christophanies began, something also apparent from the miracle of Jesus walking on the water, but still more they must look into themselves to complete the experience of encountering Christ.[62] And so the least-noted aspect of the Resurrection accounts, the one I characterized as subtraction, emerges quite sensationally in what is probably the original close of Mark. Which is not to say there is no historical information in the Marcan account, but its evaluation has to start from the theological framework, from the overall intent of the text in relation to the event that first motivated it.

It is difficult to evaluate the detail of the three days that are said to have elapsed between Christ's death and his resurrection and seem to be an integral part of the original announcement of the Easter event.[63] The gospel sources agree in assigning the discovery of the empty tomb to the first day of the Jewish week, and also that Jesus died on a Friday; the only difference is that for the synoptics that was also the day of Passover, whereas for John Passover fell on the following day, on the Sabbath, which would make the sequence of events decidedly more credible. There is no reason to question the starting point of the chronology common to the two traditions (i.e., the day of Jesus's death), but the careful theological construction of both calendars justifies the idea that the detail of three days, also widespread in the mythical-ritual symbolism of ancient Greece, is the result of an early *interpretatio* that the evangelists found already established and whose detectable intent was to frame and define the Paschal event once and for all.

The most revealing clue might come from the creedal phrase quoted by Paul, belonging to a pre-Pauline Creed from Antioch: "the third day, according to the scriptures" (1 Cor 15:4),[64] while the Gospels simply set the announcement of Resurrection on the first day of the week.[65] The contrast between the rigid formula used by Paul and the more fluid gospel accounts, narrative and variable as they are, is sharp and apparently would suggest the precedence of the latter, but it is the other way around, and not only because 1 Corinthians is an older text. Paul's quotation gives us the essential in an

archaic *kerygma* proclaiming the faith in the risen Jesus, and on their part the four evangelists try to interpret and develop the received *depositum fidei* by following their respective theological strategies and the available historical material, and thus transform the temporal unity of three days, witnessed by the Antioch profession of faith, into the germ of their narratives, all different but in agreement on this calendrical and coordinating point. Already Paul is doing the same by not specifying the location of the several Christophanies he is listing, and inserting his own experience at the very end in order to make his addressees understand that Christ's resurrection is the kernel of their experience as believers. In other words, the temporal lapse of three days was not an isolated fact that had to be mentioned in order to demonstrate the truth of the Resurrection but rather a starting point for organizing the several resurrectional stories and interpretations. This symbolic span of time had the advantage of providing more room for toning down and attenuating the precedence of the encounters in Galilee, occurring perhaps soon after the entombment but at a time unspecified by any of the sources, since it is overtaken by what was (narrated as) experienced in Jerusalem at Easter. That means that the third day with its discovery of the empty tomb was superimposed on the experience of the risen Christ in Galilee, very soon melding to form a single compact sequence marked by the rhythm of the death/rebirth triad by no means unknown in the Jewish world,[66] and found widely among the pagans as well.

These remarks do not diminish the value of the symbol and on the contrary emphasize the work done by Paul and the evangelists, a work definable as theologically scientific since it followed a procedure that comes from mythology but is not mythographic in the acceptation used by Strauss, who reduces it to a subjective projection, nor in the sense of Bultmann, who rejects the documental value of the Resurrection narratives since he does not see the vital connection of mythic procedure with reality and history. The three days diegetically underscore the reality and drama of the death of Jesus that leaves his disciples and the world bereft of his person, and also the miraculous, unpredictable action of God in bringing him back from the world of the dead. At this point it becomes easier to see that the numerical symbolism of pagan rites, through the filter of Middle Judaism, has been superimposed, traceable to an analogous background against which the similarities and differences stand out, to a similar waiting in inconsolable bereavement with the

need for an objectual reconstitution that was normally satisfied through the reparatory reconstruction of funeral rituals. This time, however, the sequence is interrupted, displaced by an event of a different order that upsets and dispels the prearranged strategies, confounding expectations and confirming the most unexpected fulfillment. The three days become the symbolic space, originating in myth and ritual, in which myth and ritual are utilized and resemanticized.

This all appears so evident in the Marcan version, with its abrupt close and reference to the appearances in Galilee, that it throws light on the other synoptic accounts as well. His is the earliest of the Gospels and is in fact the first to give us two important pieces of information about the Resurrection: the interment of the body of Jesus and the discovery of the empty tomb, taking us back to Jerusalem where everything began and the Resurrection experience had its post-Galilean sequel. All four Gospels state that the tomb was donated by Joseph of Arimathea, a detail easily disproved were it untrue, and the more credible since Mark represents Joseph as a leading member of the Sanhedrin, sympathetic to Jesus but not one of his followers; on the other hand, we have no report of Jesus being buried in a mass grave, which was the usual practice with the bodies of the crucified.[67] But what needs pondering is the possible presence of historical traces in the discovery of the empty tomb, an idea completely dismissed by Strauss in his time. Two details call for reflection. The first is the social status of the witnesses testifying to the discovery, since women occupied a position far inferior to their male counterparts in the ancient world, Jewish society included. A detail like that would hardly have been invented out of thin air by Christian writers if they were aiming to present an edifying and convincing story. The second detail is the Jewish reaction as reflected in the accusation of the body being secretly removed, a charge that Matthew attempts to counter; conversely, there seems to be no evidence as to how long the body of Jesus remained in the tomb.[68] These are interesting topics but prove nothing in themselves, especially as the actual scenes of events were altered beyond all recognition by the destruction of Jerusalem, at the same time destroying many potential witnesses against the charge. Besides, some parts of the Matthean version are clearly improbable and so testify to its nonhistorical nature,[69] though the opposite argument would appear to hold good for the malicious rumor that his legendary account set out to counter. What did happen, exactly?

It is no longer possible to give a clear answer. The central factor in any analysis must be that the evangelists themselves, when assembling and editing the Gospels from the oral and written traditions of the early communities, were the first to have no direct information. What they had to draw on were the accounts from Galilee and Jerusalem of encounters with the risen Christ, which must have included the discovery of the empty tomb, and also the rumor recorded in Matthew that caused him to make his late addition, which was not only fanciful but historically improbable since the *Sitz im Leben* changed completely with the destruction of Jerusalem. The episodes that took place in the city had obviously been set down before 70, given the prestige enjoyed by the local church along with the fact that it moved away at the outbreak of hostilities. However, when the four Gospels came to be edited, the process already begun in the creedal formula quoted by Paul had come to an end, and those episodes must have been finally coordinated with the original episodes in Galilee, up to the late inclusion of the last of the Galilean material in John 21. The two more apparitionistic Galilean Christophanies—the Transfiguration and Jesus walking on the water—changed their position in the narrative and were transformed in anticipation of the complete manifestation of Jesus as the Son of God, capable as such to combine in himself the Old Testament theophanies with the power of God as creator of heaven and earth over the natural elements. Jerusalem remained the center of gravity, by reason of its symbolic implications but also because it simplified the narrative; it finally prevailed over all, so that little evidence remains of the Galilean resurrection, but as we find in Mark, those few traces are significant and surely intentional. Unifying the data in this way certainly caused the accent to fall on the discovery of the empty tomb, whatever its initial formative nucleus which was by now unascertainable in the wake of the city's destruction. Indeed, it looks suspiciously as if the capital's tragic end provided the final impulse for interpreting the otherworldly conclusion to the life of Jesus in a way to show Christianity as the real resurrection of the Jewish religion, destined to transcend forever the Judaic nationalism that had led to disaster. And would not the empty sepulcher become an effective symbol for the Second Temple Judaism as a place of a death to be abandoned, on a par with the Temple as a religious center definitively destitute and empty of meaning? At present, a phenomenological and historical-critical analysis can say no more, but it suffices to bring us to a valid conclusion.

Inevitably the symbol of the empty sepulcher, of which Paul says nothing,[70] was also interpreted in an exterior, miraculous sense that the gospel accounts attempt to delimit and historicize through their strategy of subtraction, but as the distance in time from the events gradually grew to become enormous and irreversible, that sense finally prevailed, characterizing an absolute event to be contemplated at a distance and assimilated according to the symbolic and intermedial vocabulary of the cultures involved in the Christian message. In that way, however, the deep meaning of the Resurrection event, as a historical and mystical experience for all believers to meditate upon and share, remained largely latent and undeveloped, finally arriving at the artificial and truncated dilemmas characterizing the mentality of today. Modern rhetoric about the empty sepulcher has devolved into trivializing the Resurrection and turning it into a simple event to be noted as such, a prodigy one comes across that compels belief in its reality, without realizing that the Resurrection is thus reduced to the simple revival of a corpse, though in this case the transformation would be permanent since its subject is the true divinity. It is symptomatic that the opposite eventuality is not considered, namely that the disciples who remained in Jerusalem, or returned there, understood what the appearances of the risen Christ in Galilee meant, that the real significance of the death of Jesus was not in his tomb, that it was already empty in the sense that it neither could nor did contain or delimit the true meaning of his person and mission. The work of interpretation then continued with the post-Jerusalem reading, which I attribute to the evangelists, of the empty tomb as the emptiness of Judaism's former religious center. From the theological viewpoint, the significance of Christ's death does not lie in the disappearance or revival of a dead body but in understanding that his mediation vanquishes death itself, destroys it from its very center, revealed as empty indeed, since it is full of life. The modern dichotomy between subjective projection and objective event is completely transcended because the Resurrection, with the utmost religious and objectual intensity, shows us a reality superior to the subject/object coupling since it stands at the fountainhead of their formation and existence. The difference between the Resurrection event and the ecstatic-objectual event I see to be at the origin of humankind is not a difference of quality but entirely a matter of degree and the capacity to retroact and reveal. Let us look at the elements in the gospel accounts that support this reading.

Characteristically, the earliest Gospel introduces an angelic figure to create the necessary Christophanic register, the purpose being to underline the supernatural origin of what has happened, but it is left up to readers/believers to draw their own conclusions. Reference is also made to Galilee where the encounters with the risen Christ took place, among the poor who were the first to accept the liberating message of the rabbi from Nazareth. In the angel's words to the women there are two qualifying phrases relating to space and movement: "He is not here" and "He has gone before you into Galilee," which are clearly signals of displacement, of removal from one place and direction toward another, the real one, the place of Christ's words and eternal life, that is, the life delivered from time and death, and contained in his words for those that have ears to hear and will take them to themselves. Thus the subtraction strategy of the gospel accounts reveals its real aim to be the displaced center they move toward and from which they draw their inspiration. All four accounts, in their different ways and to different degrees, agree in reducing the evenemential tenor of the events related to an absolute minimum, to the essential register of an interpretation that becomes one with the events themselves, which is not only one of many indications that what is narrated was not directly witnessed, but also points out the direction we must take to avoid misunderstanding. Interpretation was not the final objective of the Gospels but the very problem that caused them to be written in the first place, beginning with the numerous and discordant testimonies that were their starting point and to which they offer us the key, not at the level of a chronicle or register but at the level of the profound meaning of what has been received and transmitted by the traditions. We will give a brief look at the narrative and theological strategies followed in the three Gospels that contain the more fully developed versions of the Resurrection.

In Matthew, the detail of guards being set to watch over the sepulcher and the dramatized account of the chief priests' bribing them to confirm the body-stealing story are patently justificatory and fictitious and were added specifically as a narrative rebuttal to the charge of secretly removing the body from the tomb. For Matthew, the opportunity to discredit the Judaic leaders, guilty of having spurned Israel's greatest son, was too good to be missed, and unlike the *Ur-Markus,* he enhances his account of the Christophany with some striking effects: he repeats the earthquake introduced at the moment of Jesus's death and describes the angel as looking "like lightning" (28:3) not

to mention the anticipation of the Easter event in the bodily resurrection of a host of saints who, immediately after the veil of the Temple has been rent in two, rise from their tombs and appear to many people (27:51–53). This apocalyptic symbolism merges the messianic expectations of Middle Judaism with the Passion of Jesus, over and above visualizing the final break with the Temple cult that brings the casting out of the merchants from the Temple to its eschatological realization. Yet Matthew is also limited to giving the bare essentials, repeats the sign of displacement given by the angel in Mark, "He is not here . . . he has gone before you into Galilee" (28:6–7), and then has the risen Christ begin with a brief greeting and announcement and conclude with a solemn statement of high Christology ("All authority [*exousia*] has been given to me in heaven and on earth": 28:18) followed by the missionary mandate and the final crowning sentence: "And I am with you, even to the end of time" (28:20), quite clearly the result of theological revision by the evangelist and his community.[71] Ultimately, there is not much more history in Matthew than in Mark, apart from confirming the force and centrality of the experience of encountering the risen Christ; but this is not by any means a minor point when we consider that a declaration of the kind would never have been made without a basis in the experience of compelling power, in which Matthew's entire community firmly believed (in the ancient sense of *pistis*). The forcefulness of the Resurrection experience gives grandeur and credibility to the Matthean Christology, not the reverse.

In giving his version of the conclusive event in Jesus's mission, Luke also completes his Christology of *Christus docens.* The central episode is the disciples' encounter with Jesus on the road to Emmaus, and it is by far the most extensive and detailed one, skillfully constructed to highlight the final lesson contained in the Resurrection. In this densely symbolic pericope, the disciples are first seen to comprehend the Resurrection's foundation in scripture, and only show they are able to recognize Christ with the final blessing and distribution of the Eucharistic bread, for those are the authentic signs that must be the basis for believers if they are to arrive at the real meaning of the Resurrection and make it a constant presence not so much in their lives in general as more specifically in their hearts: "And they said, one to another: 'Did not our hearts burn while he spoke to us along the way [*en te hodo*] and explained the scriptures?'" (24:32). The individual character of the response of the "heart," describing an experience that is both cognitive and

affective, should be noted here and also how it is nurtured through reciprocal communication, giving and receiving the teachings of salvation in a fraternal exchange that is the sign of the church of Christ in Acts, peculiar to and characteristic of the Lucan ecclesiology.

The *hodos* leading to Emmaus becomes the path of knowledge and witness that every Christian is called upon to follow through life, and is the real teaching of the Resurrection. Comparison of this path with the *hodos* of Parmenides is useful, since it brings out the methodological, epistemological connotation of the term *hodos,* conceptualized in Greek philosophy as a straight road, *methodos,* the path the inquiring mind follows toward knowledge, which itself constitutes salvation. Now however, in Luke, this Christological and resurrectional *methodos* no longer meets the cosmic, ontological, and conceptual criteria of philosophy and becomes a real, living presence, exactly as in the Eucharist. The risen Christ coincides completely with the Eucharist; this is underlined by his disappearance as soon as the disciples recognize him after the blessing, and has reference to his condition beyond space and time, anticipated by his being unrecognizable before and then confirmed by his final ascension. On the other hand, the detail of the risen Christ wanting to eat in the presence of the disciples to show the physical reality of his new condition confirms a concern to avoid any mentalizing of the miracle that has happened to Jesus and accords with Luke's typical tendency to objectify, but not to reify, since the body's reality serves as the historical, existential sign of authentic, proven knowledge. The physical nature of the body of the risen Christ in Luke is not therefore a physical proof, which would be a good example of circular argument, also according to the performative criteria of ancient logic, but rather the sign of correct interpretation since the teachings of the risen Christ are fully incarnate in his witness and become fully incarnate in the witness of those who follow him along the same *hodos.* The ontological aspect we saw in Parmenides has not been bypassed but humanized and historicized, and transformed into a permanent relationship that constitutes the true existence of humanity, body and soul. We can understand the type of physical nature Luke had in mind if we think of Paul's spiritual body: the act of eating does not in fact contradict the spiritual nature of Christ's body, since it confirms that element of real transformation that is, so to speak, the dynamic, theological, and ontological principle of the definitive person of Christ. As Seidensticker writes: "The

spiritual bodiliness [*Die pneumatische Leiblichkeit*] of the risen Christ is no longer subject to the laws in force in this eon [*Äon*],"[72] which is, however, to be understood inclusively, not exclusively, since it relates to the fountainhead of mediation that gathers into itself every principle of bodily production, the very source of Being that goes beyond the "essence," to use Plato's term, not because it negates it but because it contains and generates it.

This copresence of a physical, material existence and spiritual meaning, conveyed through intermedial and pneumatic/spiritual means, is found again and further developed in John, which confirms the elements common to the tradition of John and the tradition of Luke. As we might expect, without being able to foresee how, the fourth evangelist shows sublime insight in his treatment of the Resurrection event, and once again it is best to devote a section to it.

## 6. John and the Elusive Resurrection

At the center of the Resurrection experience in the fourth Gospel John places two encounters with Christ that are independent in their origin: the encounter with Mary Magdalene, which is given its most historical version here, and the encounter with Thomas, possibly based on a real experience but so thoroughly revised in its details that the original outline cannot be recovered. The theme of both episodes is the inability to recognize the risen Christ before entering into spiritual harmony with him. In Luke the disciples did not recognize Christ before the celebration of the Eucharist; John takes up this theme and skillfully develops it in a series of variations and gradations whose derivation is not from Luke's text, where there is no sign of them, but from some core text common to both gospel traditions.

The meeting between Mary Magdalene and Jesus is as dense in its theology as it is touching in its humanity, since Jesus makes himself known the moment he calls her by name, which means that he exercises his power to assign a personal identity mediated by God, and therewith to activate a communicative and visual register that to all appearances remained inoperative as long as it did not involve the emotional and affective sphere of the same sort that affected the "hearts" of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Such feelings are by no means excluded from the rational, cognitive sphere, for it

is there that they are received and brought to more complete expression. But then comes a change of register that sounds almost traumatic as Jesus tells the woman who has turned to him full of affection: "Do not become attached to me" (*me mou haptou*), the *Noli me tangere* of the Latin tradition. However, this should not be seen as a sacred ban on contact but as an appeal not to become attached to the person of Jesus, not to detain him, to cling to him for emotional support and consolation because that is not the spiritual, meaningful dynamism of the glorified Mediation of Christ. This means that the risen Christ in John is a point of departure not a conclusion, the beginning of an irresistible dynamic toward salvation, which cannot stop at a single affective relationship, at the bond with Jesus the man, because what comes to prevail above all else is the saving mediation as a whole, the supreme fullness of the Christological title, which empowers all those who follow Christ for love, and with love, to extend that title transitively both to themselves and to the whole world. There is no severity in the words spoken by the risen Christ but rather firmness in calling for the only sacrifice that can renew the sacrifice he accepted. Here is the fourth Gospel's final transformation of the Eucharistic doctrine, and it consists in indicating the real presence present not only in the body and blood of Christ, which nonetheless exist and live a life permanently transformed, but also in the mediatory and transitive significance acquired as a result of their glorious condition.

It is among the most complex passages, not only on account of the profundity of John's reflections as he makes this final synthesis of his theological, ecclesiological, and sacramental ideas, but also because we no longer possess the mediatory and intermedial coordinates familiar to him and his public they could use as guidelines for their experience and thinking. To grasp the sense of it adequately, it must be read with careful attention to all the extremely dense nuances of the words addressed to Mary Magdalene:

> "Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to my Father; go instead to my brethren and tell them: 'I am ascending to my Father and to your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went and told the disciples she had seen the Lord and he had said this to her. (20:17–18)

The explanation of the reason why Mary cannot "cling" to Jesus results in a sort of theological double negative that ends by affirming what it appears to

deny at first: when Jesus has ascended to the Father, then will Mary be able to really grasp him, finally "cling" to him and establish permanent contact. But this implies that the risen Christ will have completed his mission on Earth, its outcome being a renewed and permanent presence, the realized eschatology of a completed everlasting mediation. This completion is described in a phrase that expresses a perfect transitivity, a reciprocity corresponding to what the transitivity of the Trinity will be, and yet it sounds perfectly relational, pastoral, and ecclesiological: "I am ascending to my Father and to your Father, to my God and your God," a theological parallelism in which the paratactic conjunction "and" corresponds to the life-giving, unifying role of the Spirit that Jesus came to bring. Before this phrase in John, the evangelist has Jesus make a declaration of brotherhood uniting him with those who follow him, a union made possible by the initial distinction of roles in the twice-repeated "my/your" formula in which the Son is given precedence over God's other children, and where equality comes from accepting inequality, transitivity comes from choosing to suffer intransitivity, and complete intimacy is the fruit of enduring painful absence. There is a final touch of transitivity in action, since according to the request of Jesus Mary Magdalene herself is to pronounce the phrase, in her own person bearing verbal witness to the performance of this saving transmission in which the messenger coincides with the message and its sender.

This all sounds most convincing, but it is still not enough since on their own these remarks would run the risk of becoming too spiritualistic, distancing us from the performative and intermedial background that was decisive for Christians in antiquity, and for Jesus himself since it supplied the bricks, as it were, to build the bridge of salvation for the divine Mediation. John therefore shows us Christ's salvation in the process of its being carried out, in a way he intended would remain the same throughout the history of salvation. We see it in the immediately following scene, when, in the evening of the same day, Jesus enters the place where the disciples have gathered together behind locked doors, in fear of the Jewish authorities. It is the founding moment of John's ecclesiology:

> Jesus entered and stood in their midst [*este eis to meson*] and said: "Peace be with you," and so saying he showed them his hands and side. Then the disciples were glad at seeing the Lord. Then Jesus said to them again: "Peace

> be with you. As the Father has sent me [*apestalken*], so I also send [*pempo*] you," and when he had said this he breathed on them and said: "Receive the holy spirit [*pneuma hagion*]: if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them, but if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld." (20:19–23)

Spatial adimensionality enables Jesus to pass through the locked doors and enter the room in which the disciples have taken refuge or, rather, barricaded themselves. We have already found in Luke the idea of the risen Christ as no longer subject to space-time limitations, and the other synoptic Gospels also contain hints of it. The fourth Gospel, however, develops the idea with a symbolism of movement that completely conflicts with the tradition found in the synoptics and in the fourth Gospel itself, of the stone rolled away from the entrance to the sepulcher.[73] In a text as skillfully constructed as this, the contrast is too obvious to be unintentional and points toward a symbolic/real interpretation of the condition of the risen Christ; and this interpretation is borne out by the fact that the writer excludes any detail that suggests a miracle, not only to avoid distracting his readers/followers but also as a sign to them that this is an interpretive narrative that wants to communicate the profound theological meaning of an event and experience. At the same time, the evangelist transmits the connotation of Christ's complete mastery of space-time transitivity, which he now passes on to those who love him and delight in his presence.

The fourth evangelist is doing no more than expound and build on Paul's idea of the resurrected body as a spiritual body, not in order to dissociate the condition of Christ's body from the human bodily condition but to testify that the human body was destined to a dimension of incorruptible salvation that rendered equally incorruptible the marks of its history, the wounds and the lacerations of its brutal end, from which it arose through the intervention of the Father's Mediation that was never so fully incarnate in the Son as when it was put to death in the Son. The copresence found in Luke of a spiritual resurrected Christ, recognizable only if we relate to him in understanding, and a resurrected Christ physically present, who eats in front of the disciples to convince them of his flesh and blood existence, is more fully examined and explained.

In John the pierced hands and side displayed by the risen Christ are a transparent sign he can present to the disciples of the resurrection of his own

history, which is the history of humankind and its encounter with God, now recognized and seen to be irreversibly redeemed. At this the disciples rejoice spontaneously because their recognition of the glorious body of Christ is immediate and complete, "im-mediate" since the risen Christ has put himself at the very center of the Mediation, as the expression εἰς τὸ μέσον suggests, spatially recalling the position of the victim in the middle of the group, as well as the murdered Zechariah in the Temple, but now it denotes the salvation of this same victim, redeemed and raised to everlasting life.

The first greeting of peace expresses the Peace as God gives it, and comes to represent the inexhaustible life divine made visible in the midst (*meson*) of humanity's sufferings; the second greeting of peace, coming before the mandate given by Jesus to his followers, establishes a perfect transitive symmetry between the mandate he has received from the Father and the mandate he transmits to them. Now he can take the final step of sending the other Paraclete, the *Pneuma* itself of God, to continue his mission. The evangelist utilizes a veritably pneumatic gesture to visualize this for us, a breath sent by Jesus to his disciples that introduces them into the dimension of the definitive saving Mediation, corresponding to the dimension of the new Israel, the church. This same spiritual and ecclesiological symbolism is extended and dramatized by Luke in the Pentecost episode in Acts. However, the words establishing the church in John call for specific comment, lest misunderstandings arise in spite of the evangelist doing all he can to forestall them in his long theologico-narrative argument.

The church receives the power to grant release from sin or not to grant it, not because it possesses an authority it may exercise as it pleases, which has been the inevitable conclusion of a mentality that has dominated centuries of Christian history, but because it is the representative on earth of a pardoning transitivity, the sign of the Paraclete, of the breath of the risen Christ that breathes through history from then on. The sinners who will not be forgiven are therefore those who do not share and accept the pardoning transitivity of the Holy Spirit, and clearly the leaders of the church will be the first to place themselves outside this stream of salvation if they do not themselves live within its life-giving spirit. The apparently unconditional nature of the mandate, with the conditions for forgiving or not forgiving sin left unspecified, expresses instead the unconditional nature of forgiveness and the self-exclusion that follows at once if it is not accepted. And so the most

demanding and open of the ecclesiologies crowns the imposing achievement of John's Gospel as a whole, in which the truth that shall set men free is the Truth of the risen Christ who is not afraid to undergo the indelible sufferings inflicted by men because he forgives them freely, and communicates to his executioners the power to free themselves of the wrong they have done. Here indeed we reach the supreme realization of the freely given, generous hospitality of Admetus that Euripides dramatized in *Alcestis*.

But, through the episode of doubting Thomas, the fourth Gospel gives us a further indication of how we can access and understand the Christ who is permanently present in the *meson* of his community. The episode bears every mark of having been deliberately constructed to demonstrate a point fundamental for our understanding of all the foregoing text and is usually given a banal interpretation according to the scheme of "disbelief → factual proof → belief," with various disquisitions on the absence or insufficiency of his faith. This is a riddle that modern superficiality has reduced to a disconcertingly banal sequence, but considering the level of historical awareness we ought to have achieved by now it is surprising how little we ask ourselves what its terms might have meant two thousand years ago. If Thomas were no more than a repentant empirically minded skeptic, the fourth evangelist would not have had him utter the most solemn and explicit profession of *pistis* in the whole Gospel: "My Lord and my God!" (20:28), which concludes the original version.

In the first place, today's commonplace banalities are undoubtedly disproved by what the notion and experience of *pistis* meant for early Christians, since it was almost the opposite of what it is generally taken to mean nowadays. However, the point of the episode is not to reiterate something already amply illustrated in the course of the Gospel but rather to see *what* exactly *pistis* in the risen Christ involves. We need to recognize the extent of the hermeneutic damage done by conventional interpretations. If Thomas did not believe in the risen Christ because he had not seen it for himself but believed later when he had physical proof, then everybody not in a position to see the risen Christ with their own eyes should resign themselves to lacking faith, and Jesus's comment about the blessedness of those who "not having seen/known" (*me idontes*) nevertheless "believe" (20:29) sounds like a sort of consolation prize, bringing everything together in a faith that is subjective and therefore impotent, as it has no object and no authentic

mediation. It is not a question of imposing a present or future tense onto ἰδόντες so as to allude to generations of believers yet to come; for the time being, until we have a translation of the passage that does not misrepresent it, it is a question of understanding, which is why this future-oriented, pseudo-consolatory inflexion is wrong, and here once again the comparison with Alcestis's indefinite and problematic resurrection becomes relevant.

Thomas is not incredulous of the vision itself experienced by his fellow disciples; what he wants, instead, is to verify whether their experience is an effective means to fully regain Christ's mediation and the saved and saving object he promised. In other words, Thomas is asking for full objectual confirmation, specifically to avoid falling back on projective or subjective faith that must leave a true believer unsatisfied. It could be said that he does not want his faith to rest on a resurrection that is unreal and representational, intermedial and not mediatory, of which Alcestis's resuscitation is a magnificent ancient example, with much unexplored spirituality though still steeped in the infernal powers and unable to wrest from them a definitively redeemed human object. To penetrate the episode of Thomas, we must avoid all that is theologically abstract, as well as what appears physically concrete since it would prove no less illusory.

The decisive moment in the episode does not come when Thomas sees with his own eyes to remedy his initial lack of faith. In fact he does not actually touch the risen Christ:[74] his declaration of Christological faith follows immediately on Christ's invitation to put his finger on the marks of the nails and his hand in his side where it was pierced by the Roman soldiers. What we witness here is a sort of sudden blaze of insight as Thomas finally "sees" and his faith in the risen Christ is confirmed by subtraction, by restraint, not by empirical or metaphysical fact-checking. His error is not to desire confirmation, nor to seek it in a risen Christ who is unquestionably real, but is the direction in which he looks for it, in empirical-metaphysical proof, accepting exterior verification while nothing takes place within the individual who thinks everything can be settled by following a kind of protocol. This means, in the comparative terms of the present study, that the alternative to the as yet indeterminate resuscitation of Alcestis is not resurrection in the body paraded as a factual triumph, a theological slap in the face, but is instead a specific type of deeper insight into the relationship with Christ, into the true nature of his Mediation.

The background to the pericope of doubting Thomas is given to us in Jesus's farewell speech to his disciples. After announcing his betrayal by Judas, he shows them his way, his *hodos:* "Of where I am going, you know the way [*oidate ten hodon*]" (14:4), playing on the words *oidate*/*hodon* to underline the identity of the way and of the knowledge concerning it. Thomas then asks: "Lord, we do not know where you are going: how can we know the way [*ten hodon eidenai*]?" (14:5). This known and unknown *hodos,* this *methodos,* divine but evidently accessible to mankind, is precisely what is unfolding before the still unseeing eyes of the disciples, the path that no longer has place leading to betrayal and violence at the hands of men so that the Truth may be witnessed. Parmenides's *hodos* and the upward/downward movement in Plato's cave are humanized here and reveal all their historical and cognitive importance in the comparison.

The way, the *hodos,* has not been simple and has consisted in bringing the elevation of the object proposed by Greek wisdom into single terrible union with the experiential price paid for it, in Parmenides still concealed beneath the real victimary metaphors of the *eon* enchained, and in Plato transposed to the shameful death suffered by the one just man, which the philosopher in his horror refused to contemplate more closely. Now this lengthy process, of which Kant and Spinoza have shown us an essential modern stage, comes together. The better commentaries on John also stress the difference between the fourth Gospel's preexisting, omnipotent Jesus who dominates events and the figure that emerges elsewhere, especially in Mark, experiencing events like any human being who cannot control them. In spite of what one might think, however, there is no contradiction between these two perspectives, since the superiority of John's Christ is nothing but his being one with the transcendent plane of the Father's love, inaccessible to human beings and visible to them only as powerlessness. We must therefore invert the evangelist's theological language and recognize what he portrays as an upraising to glory for what it really was historically, an appallingly painful death, whose true nature he was perfectly aware of. The author of John is under no illusion and knows full well what he is talking about when he translates the Passion of the incarnate Mediation into his theological language of glorification. The crux of his figural, narrative argument is that the way of Jesus coincides completely with his person and with all that is happening to him. That and that alone is the sense of his answer to Thomas (14:6), the most celebrated words in the

Gospel, and the most misunderstood because they are usually flattened out to a faith-based affirmation that means nothing to the professed believer, nor to the professed unbeliever: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (*ego eimi he hodos kai he aletheia kai he zoe*). The *nomen divinum* I-am is reaffirmed one final time in order to set in motion a transitive circularity with the way to reach it, with the revealing truth that makes it accessible, and the never-ending life that is its substance.

Thomas was not wrong to look for confirmation in the print of the nails on the hands and feet of Christ and the wound in his side; he only erred in not understanding what it meant: the immeasurable value of objectual destruction followed by definitive objectual reconstitution, and through but one intermediary, through the love of Christ that is the very substance of God. In other words, Thomas understands the answer given by Jesus to his previous question. Now at last he *sees.* He simply feels love for the risen Christ and recognizes that he suffered, died, and was lifted up to eternal life through this love. Christ's final macarism about those who believe without "having seen," that is, without knowing in a this-worldly sense, refers to those who achieve this supreme vision, coinciding completely with *pistis*-assurance in Jesus irrespective of any physical seeing or earthly confirmation. The time has come for this highly problematic phrase to be translated in a way that does not suppress and betray its signifying dynamism: "Is it because you have seen me [*heorakas*] you are certain [*pepisteukas*]? Blessed are those who have not seen, and reach this same certainty [*hoi me idontes kai pisteusantes*]" (20:29). To reduce *pisteuein* to our subjective faith-based vocabulary at this conclusive stage in John's whole presentation is particularly disastrous, and we would do better to abandon the subject altogether rather than perpetuate the obscuring fog of sentiment and psychologism. There is nothing spiritualistic or subjectivistic about this resurrection of love and knowledge because henceforward objectual recognition is to be a powerful influence in the real world of every man and woman. This by no means excludes, but in fact implies, personal faith understood as reliance and trust, not as a subjective, arbitrary representation. And when in *The Winter's Tale* the statue of Hermione comes back to life and Paulina tells Leontes "It is required / you do awake your faith,"[75] her words are to be understood in that relational, inclusive sense. There is no difference between the reawakening of faith in Leontes and the reawakening of the wife he loves, and that is the experience, the experiential *pistis* of the risen

Christ, that the fourth Gospel helps us regain with its unmistakable power, while through Shakespeare's art we relive it in an essentially modern key. The Way of Christ in John is the Way of Truth, and it is one with the indestructible life of Jesus, he who had himself put to death for love and through this same power of supreme Mediation rose again from the dead. Thus Christ's third greeting of peace is finally accomplished, unquestionably for those who experience and share it with him but just as inaccessible to those who do not. With this there begins another way of looking at things,

> That through the eyes gives a gentleness to the heart,
> Not to be understood by those who do not experience it.[76]

We will misunderstand these lines from Dante's *Vita Nuova* if we think they refer to a subjective sentiment, a mere feeling of affection, and that is the trap set by the *trobar clus* of courtly love into which the unenlightened inevitably fall. In actual fact this is the long-sought, much-debated *proof* of what is called the existence of God, an ugly way of putting it, better expressed as existence in God enlightened by God, and therefore humanizing, or more directly as divinized and divinizing existence, and therefore humanized and humanizing, or again as ecstatic existence able to reach and express the Divine because it is able to express and realize the Human. But there is no need to discuss and demonstrate this now because it has already been shown, and any addition would be just as superfluous for those who understand as for those who do not. The complete phenomenon of Man has been reached, and it is the complete phenomenon of God.

This might seem a disappointing conclusion after such a wide-ranging study that could have gone on to follow out arguments endlessly. But at a certain point, a book, like life itself, must come to an end and leave its message to make its way, repeating, no matter at how low a level, the experience of death and resurrection narrated in the Gospels. And countless times in the course of its history, the Christian message itself has died to rise again, giving the lie to all ready-prepared and evenemential expectations, surprising continually by a creativeness that is not the least part of its legacy. Whenever it has been presumed to be finished and dead, the Way of Truth and Life of the risen Christ has reappeared in new forms and flourished with unexpected vigor, its developments having all the beauty and complexity of human life

and history, of its infinite phenomenology. It would be an unforgivable mistake to think the objectuality of the risen Christ is contained in the few lines of text that tell us about it: it would mean stubbornly refusing to recognize the conscious strategy through subtraction that inspires and gives life to those lines. If we want to know more, we need only read or reread the philosophers, writers, and artists who have written about the defense and recovery of human objectuality. And Dante may stand as representative for them all. Their works are all the continuation of the evangelist's aim, while the objectual prefigurations we have traced out in the culture of antiquity, as in all human cultures, are its real anticipation.

We have sufficient elements to bring our journey to a close, wayfarers as we always are as writers and readers; or rather we have enough to realize that its end is a beginning, a new departure, recovering all the stages before and after it, with a view to overall rethinking of the ground covered in order to map out other routes no longer pitted against each other as enemies, in an age that can boast of surpassing all past eras and all present cultures in having made a raison d'être of enmity disguised as friendship, intolerance as freedom, and destruction as salvation.

## 7. A Classical-Christian Resurrection

Greco-Roman antiquity and Judeo-Christian antiquity—since it is not a question of one but of two distinct and complementary antiquities, each of them internally twofold—intermixed and fought fiercely for centuries. The legacy to the Western world that stemmed from them was as rich as it was composite and as conspicuously diverse as secretly uniform, and in the end came to influence the whole world in various ways. The struggle between these two dual traditions has been summed up as the dilemma between Athens and Jerusalem, a formulation inspired by Tertullian,[77] and taken up again in the twentieth century by Leo Strauss. It has, however, been transformed into a typically modern confrontation that is inadequate with regard to its object on two counts: first because it eliminates Rome's role as their medium, a position it held for centuries, and secondly because it is blind to the subterranean but formative contribution made by Athens, transmitting to Jerusalem not only its clear intellectual light but also the revealing obscurity

of its failures. To view it as a dilemma is deceptive, at least in part, but the limited vision apparent on both sides is a historical fact: they fought tooth and nail and in that extravagant fashion learned to know themselves better, constructing their identities positively and negatively, by intentional simplification and unintentional intersection. There was no pretense about such a long, recurrent, and closely joined conflict. Undoubtedly, an enormous gulf divides the Greco-Roman world's indifference to the subjugated, denied of their freedom and citizen rights, from the sense of pity for the weak and the outcast that developed in the tiny Jewish nation and fueled the impassioned preaching of an obscure teacher from Galilee. Nevertheless, the idea of *basileia tou theou,* the Kingdom of God, the universal empire of God's love, would never have formed without the conceptual and ontological universalism of Athenian philosophy and the universalism of Roman politics and law. In human history there has never been a more exciting and epoch-making conflict than this. The whole of European civilization developed in the spirit of its premises and consequences, with the accent now on one factor now on the other, but always conserving and renewing itself until it succeeded in holding together—and on more solid foundations than it suspected—the two elements of an immense riddle that held thousands of years of history in its embrace.

Matters no longer stand like that now. The current outcome is a kind of Johannine irony applied to history. At present, both antiquities, Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian, are fighting on *another* front, defending past humanity in the face of future inhumanity, inhumanity—it should be noted—originating in that same Western world become unmindful of its past mediations and fast descending into the abyss of pure power, of blind objectual negation. For this reason, any view of these two formative pillars of our culture as antagonistic toward one another is out of place and time today, unjust toward its unperceived past while dramatically overtaken, instead, by events to which we are all held hostage, helpless as we watch the rising tide of global violence that looms over us all like a sort of debt still to be paid, blown up and made unreal by the media in a flood of gossip and images equally without sense or object. The battle fought by the Christian apologists achieved its end at the time, formulating and studying in depth the then-nascent religion; and in modern times, the polemical confrontation of Nietzsche with Girard has undoubtedly proved useful in rethinking

the terms of the conflict, bringing about a different historical and religious awareness. And the same may be said—with all the uncertainties, oscillations, and contradictions of a vast historical and cultural polemic that ended in an epochal disaster—for the *Kultur* versus *Zivilisation* debate that we saw in Thomas Mann, and that engaged some of the keenest minds in Europe before and after the First World War.

An analogy is recognizable here, in the following chiasmus: Christianity/paganism—*Kultur*/*Zivilisation,* but in what exactly does it consist? The gnosiological intermediation between these two pairs of opposites, with its twentieth-century phenomenological solution, itself suggests the answer once we have the overall picture given by the present study, a picture that is still fragmentary but nonetheless impressive, in the coordinates for completion and development that it makes visible. The living, structural analogy between these opposites that nurtured human history in Europe, and now extends worldwide, consists in the fact, the historical *phainomenon,* that neither pair can really exist without the relationship on which their opposition is based, without a *concordia discors* that becomes a *complexio oppositorum,* with its rich complex of tensions that is an essential part of human reality, of history, and also, we can add—bearing in mind that its lesser complexity nevertheless conceals unlimited potential—of the physical and biological world from which history and humanity emerged. This reminds us, moreover, that there is also a revealing mismatch, since universal *Zivilisation* in no way corresponds to Christian universalism but grossly caricatures it, taking the worst aspects of imperialism in every age, combining them with the vocabulary of universal equality and the indefeasible rights of the children of God, and making a propaganda weapon of it all, a deadly weapon for exerting pressure through the media and judiciary, quick to destroy anyone at all with the power of a *skandalon* that can instantly spread throughout the world. Quite clearly Christianity, as with good reason we understand it to be, can only be on the side of the losers in this conflict, which is completely one-sided in material terms, that is, on the side of those who make history by being forgotten, while the rampant globalitarianism in which we live triumphs across the board.

But what amounts to a retreat leads to an unhoped-for result, unexpectedly reconciling what appeared to be irreconcilable and revealing the premise that may enable us to regain a universalism that is different, different

in that it includes all we have been and are. This backward step of Christianity, understood in its inseparability from Judaism and Greco-Roman culture, toward a past that everything seems to deny and destroy, may prove to be a leap forward, toward *Zivilisation,* by which is meant the *Zivilisation* that only respect for all its various component *Kulturen* can humanize and transform into an affirmation of coming humanity, the human society of the future. That is the message of Europe's contradictory history for all the world's cultures, whatever fate awaits the old human world of sundown and adventure, whether it is to dwindle and disappear or to widen its horizons and coexist decently.

And now that all the strife is over and the battles fought, all the opposing views clearly set out and the differences of nuance explored, we are in a position to add, as we ought, that a logic of an oppositional and binary type is not what we need to continue to battle along humanity's path into the future, but a logic of superior transitivity that takes in what is human, including humanity's strange power to generate the divine from within itself, in the name of the irreversible experience of the announcement of the death of God. We must set our sights on a resurrection of human history and culture, and make that the objectual secret of our thinking, of our future.

# Notes

### 1. The Problem of the Sources

1. See vol. 1, chapter 3, § 4.
2. Cf. L. Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion,* Engl. trans. E. Sinclair (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 53–85. On Spinoza's exegesis, cf. also the more recent S. Nadler, *A Book Forged in Hell: Spinoza's Scandalous Treatise and the Birth of the Secular Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 104–42.
3. See vol. 1, introduction, § 2; E. Husserl, *Logische Untersuchungen*, ed. U. Panzer, vol. 19, part 1 (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1984), 10.
4. Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique,* 215 ff.
5. Cf. Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique,* 86–104.
6. Cf. R.E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 158–61 and 267–69.
7. Cf. H. Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 156–57.
8. On the sacred and magical value of writing above all in the monotheistic religions, cf. G. Van Der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation,* English trans. J.E. Turner and H.H. Penner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 437–46 (cf. G. Van Der Leeuw, *La religion dans son essence et ses manifestations: Phénoménologie de la religion,* Fr. edition ed. by the author in collaboration with J. Marty [Paris: Payot, 1955], 429–38).
9. M. Hengel, *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Investigation of the*

*Collection and Origin of the Canonical Gospels,* Engl. trans. J. Bowden (London: SCM Press, 2000), 48–49.

10. The scholarly debate on this point is often disappointing: cf. E. Lupieri, *A Commentary on the Apocalypse of John,* Engl. trans. M. Poggi Johnson and A. Kamesar (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 8n24 (see also note below).
11. A homonymy is strangely admitted as more probable by Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament,* 803, but following this line of reasoning we could admit many other homonymies with the apostle, the evangelist, the author(s) of the Johannine epistles, not to mention the question of the mysterious Beloved Disciple. It would be the case to recall Ockham's razor: *entia* (= Johns) *non sunt moltiplicanda praeter necessitatem.*
12. Dante, *Paradiso,* XXV, 1–2 (D. Alighieri, *La commedìa,* ed. A. Lanza [Anzio: De Rubeis, 1996], 711); cf. XXIII, 62.
13. Dante, *Paradiso,* XXXIII, 85–87 (Alighieri, *La commedìa,* 774).
14. Cf. Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 210–11.
15. J.P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus,* vol. 1, *The Roots of the Problem and the Person* (New York: Doubleday, 1991) (henceforth Meier 1), 43–44 and 51–52n12.
16. Meier 1:43–45.
17. On the debate, see D. Pevarello, *Il discorso eucaristico in Giovanni 6: unità e messaggio. Complessità e ricchezza di un caso di ipertestualità* (Bologna: EDB, 2012), 85 ff.
18. It seems to me that the *status quaestionis* has not changed much since C.H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), which rightly explains the points in common with precanonical oral or written traditions.
19. See below § 5.
20. Meier 1:124–39.
21. Besides textual-critical reasons, there is a clear tendency to blend together different Christian sources, which is a trait typical of the second-century Christian literature: J.P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus,* vol. 5, *Probing the Authenticity of the Parables* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 90–96.
22. Meier 1:124.
23. Cf. J. Jeremias, *Unbekannte Jesusworte* (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1963). Meier 1:114–15, is negative on the possible historical value of the ἄγραφα on the grounds that most of them come from the apocryphal gospels, which is true, but some of them have different Christian sources, so that they would deserve a treatment based on the same criteria the author applies to the canonical sources (see below § 4).
24. Pevarello, *Il discorso eucaristico,* 43 ff.
25. Lupieri, *A Commentary on the Apocalypse,* ix.
26. H. De Lubac, *Histoire et Esprit: L'intelligence de l'Écriture d'après Origène* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2002), 217–27.
27. Origen, *In Johannem,* I, vi, 36 and vii, 40.

28. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament,* 163–64.
29. Meier 1:372–73, implicitly recognizes this fact, though rightly excluding the possibility of a biography of Jesus (ibid., 406–9), since from the very start we deal with theographies telling and explaining his divine status.
30. A. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede,* Engl. trans. W. Montgomery (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 13–26. This is the beginning of the so-called Old Quest for the historical Jesus.
31. A. Schweitzer, *Geschichte der Leben-Jesu Forschung: Von Reimarus zu Wrede* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1906).
32. Meier 1:167–95. Useful but less satisfying is the discussion of the criteria in G. Theissen and A. Merz, *Der historische Jesus: Ein Lehrbuch* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996), 116–22.
33. Meier 1:174–75.
34. The criterion of difference (*Differenzkriterium*) presented and rejected in Theissen and Merz, *Der historische Jesus,* 117, is insufficient: its unilateral definition clearly reflects the one-sided contrapositions of the previous German studies on the historical Jesus in the twentieth century, whereas the real differences are to be looked for in a proper historical-cultural context.
35. I deem it appropriate to unify the two criteria proposed in Meier 1:168–74.
36. Meier 1:177.
37. J.P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus,* vol. 3, *Companions and Competitors* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 128 ff.
38. J.D. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), 74 ff.
39. The Greek βασιλεία is the standard translation of *imperium,* and in any case the very use of the image suggests Jesus's linguistic and semantic awareness of its universalistic import.
40. As representative of this tendency, see W. Stegemann, *Jesus und seine Zeit* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2010), and M. Pesce, *Da Gesù al cristianesimo* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2011).
41. G. Garbini, *Vita e mito di Gesù* (Brescia: Paideia, 2015).
42. G. Garbini, *Dio della terra, dio del cielo: Dalle religioni semitiche al giudaismo e al cristianesimo* (Brescia: Paideia, 2011), 10; Garbini, *Vita e mito di Gesù,* 18–20 and 26–27.
43. G. Jossa, *Gesù e i movimenti di liberazione della Palestina* (Brescia: Paideia, 1980), 252–76.
44. See G. Garbini, *Myth and History in the Bible*, Engl. trans. by C. Peri (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 77–78; and here vol. 1, p. 454 and notes 83–84.
45. Garbini, *Vita e mito di Gesù,* 20–21 and 139–40.
46. Garbini, *Vita e mito di Gesù,* 145–47.

47. Garbini, *Vita e mito di Gesù,* 52.
48. C. Gianotto, *Giacomo, fratello di Gesù* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2013), 130–32. On these topics, see below, vol. 2, chapter 6, § 2.
49. Garbini, *Vita e mito di Gesù,* 52–53.
50. Garbini, *Vita e mito di Gesù,* 10.
51. Garbini, *Vita e mito di Gesù,* 32n1 and 144–45.
52. Garbini, *Vita e mito di Gesù,* 38–42.
53. Garbini, *Vita e mito di Gesù,* 137.
54. Garbini, *Vita e mito di Gesù,* 136.
55. Garbini, *Vita e mito di Gesù,* 97–196 and 122–32.
56. Garbini, *Vita e mito di Gesù,* 138.
57. R. Girard, *Des choses cachées depuis la foundation du monde: Recherches avec Jean-Michel Oughourlian et Guy Lefort* (Paris: Grasset, 1991), 576–77.
58. Garbini, *Vita e mito di Gesù,* 116–17.
59. Garbini, *Vita e mito di Gesù,* 135–36, and 135n1; the idea was already widely argued in Garbini, *Myth and History in the Bible,* Engl. trans. C. Peri (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 120–26.
60. See G. Garbini, *Dio della terra, Dio del cielo*, 76–81.
61. See below, vol. 2, chapter 8, §§ 1–2.
62. G. Garbini, *Il vangelo aramaico di Matteo e altri saggi* (Brescia: Paideia, 2017), 261–306.
63. A. Nygren, *Eros and Agape,* Engl. trans. P.S. Watson (London: SPCK, 1982).
64. Nygren, *Eros and Agape,* 51 and 92.
65. The argument against the authenticity of the quote based on its difference from the Masoretic text does not go through because the LXX text quoted by Jesus was widespread in Middle Judaism and probably corresponded to an older Hebrew text; besides, this teaching is consistent with all the preaching of Jesus: see J.P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus,* vol. 4, *Law and Love* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) (henceforth Meier 4), 120–23 and 178n146.
66. Garbini, *Vita e mito di Gesù,* 67.
67. Hengel, *The Four Gospels,* 51–56.
68. M. Simonetti, *Il Vangelo e la storia: Il cristianesimo antico (secc. I–IV)* (Roma: Carocci, 2010), 54–55.
69. The historical value of the Roman tradition on St. Peter has been admitted also by a scholar without any confessional penchant, namely A. Carandini, *Su questa pietra: Gesù, Pietro e la nascita della Chiesa* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2013), 66 ff.; on St. Paul, the passage used by Garbini and others as proof of his journey to Spain turns out on the contrary to be a proof of his martyrdom in Rome, once translated from his rhetorical setting: see E. Prinzivalli and M. Simonetti, *Seguendo Gesù: Testi cristiani delle origini,* vol. 1, Fondazione L. Valla (Milano: A. Mondadori, 2010), 465–66n54; on the

historical value of the Pauline letters, cf. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament,* 422–36.

70. Cf. the balanced considerations in Gianotto, *Giacomo,* 135–37.
71. On the different acceptations of the term Judeo-Christianity, cf. J. Daniélou, *Théologie du Judéo-christianisme: Histoire des doctrines chrétiennes avant Nicée* (Tournai: Desclée, 1958), 17–20.
72. L. Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (1952; repr. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 142–201.
73. See Strauss, *Persecution,* 9–19 and 38–94; L. Strauss, *On Maimonides: The Complete Writings,* ed. by K. Hart Green (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).
74. B. Spinoza, *Werke,* vol. 1, *Tractatus theologico-politicus,* ed. G. Gawlick and F. Niewöhner (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1989), 44.
75. Spinoza, *Werke,* 1:46.
76. B. Spinoza, *Ethica Ordine Geometrico demonstrata,* V, xxxvi, in Spinoza, *Werke,* vol. 2, *Tractatus de intellectus emendatione—Ethica,* ed. K. Blumenstock (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1989), 544.
77. I. Kant, *Kritik der Urtheilskraft,* in *Werke,* vol. 5 (Berlin: Reimer, 1913), 452.
78. I. Kant, *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der blossen Vernunft,* in *Werke,* vol. 6 (Berlin: Reimer, 1914), 128.
79. Kant, *Die Religion,* 113 (my translation tries to render the specific Kantian meaning of the expression).
80. G.W.F. Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke,* vol. 1, *Frühe Schriften I,* ed. F. Nicolin and G. Schüler (Hamburg: Meiner, 1989), 205–78. This work is ignored by Schweitzer, as are all the philosophical lines of thought on the paradox of Jesus.
81. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus,* 63, and more widely pages 62–67.
82. R. Osculati, *Schleiermacher: L'uomo, il pensatore, il cristiano* (Brescia: Queriniana, 1980), 16–18 and 176–78.
83. Starting from his Über *die Religion: Reden and die Gebildeten unter ihren Verächtern* (1799): see Osculati, *Schleiermacher,* 79–109.
84. Osculati, *Schleiermacher,* 322–26.
85. He finally mentioned his rival (see below, vol. 2, chapter 7, § 2), probably because in the megalomania of his last attack against Christianity, Nietzsche was self-confident enough to do that.
86. K. Löwith, *Von Hegel zu Nietzsche: Der revolutionäre Bruch im Denken des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart: Fischer, 1969), 65–66.
87. Strauss's debt to Schleiermacher is partially acknowledged in P.C. Hodgson, "Strauss's Theological Development from 1825 to 1849," introduction to D.F. Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined,* ed. P.C. Hodgson (London: SCM, 1973), xxii, but without taking account of the deceptive Hegelian cliché; by the way, the anecdote of Strauss's comment to Schleiermacher on Hegel's death just after his arrival in Berlin is just a

joke: "But it was for his sake that I came here!" (ibid.); obviously, such a phrase, besides being in bad taste, would have been heavily offensive to his interlocutor.

88. As an example of flat and misleading Hegelian interpretation, see Löwith, *Von Hegel zu Nietzsche,* 360–62.
89. Strauss, *The Life of Jesus,* 773–74.
90. Hodgson, "Strauss's Theological Development," xxii–xxiii.
91. Strauss, *The Life of Jesus,* 78.
92. Strauss, *The Life of Jesus,* 82 (with some interventions).
93. Cf. G. Fornari, *Mito, tragedia, filosofia: Dall'antica Grecia al Moderno* (Roma: Studium, 2017), 569–70.
94. Mainly in the third part of Marx, Ökonomisch-philosophische *Manuskripte aus dem Jahre 1844.*
95. Strauss, *The Life of Jesus,* 779 (with an intervention); D.F. Strauss, *Das Leben Jesu kritisch bearbeitet* (Tübingen: Osiander, 1840), 708–9.
96. On Feuerbach's relationship with Hegel, see Löwith, *Von Hegel zu Nietzsche,* 86–98.
97. Strauss considered the thesis of the Marcan priority but rejected it because he always considered the strong presence of miracles in the second Gospel to be a later legendary development (analogously to the apocryphal gospels).
98. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus,* 180–222.
99. J. Weiss, *Die Predigt Jesu vom Reiche Gottes* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1892).
100. For a reconstruction of his impact on the research of the last century, see G. Gaeta, *Il Gesù moderno* (Torino: Einaudi, 2009), 36–45.
101. R. Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (London: SCM Press, 1966), 11–13.
102. The ontological difference is not openly presented in *Sein und Zeit* but is thematized in the contemporary *Die Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie*. Vol. 24 of *Gesamtausgabe*. (Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 1997), 169–71.
103. M. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2006), §§ 51–53, pp. 252–67 (vol. 2 of Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe* [Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 1977], 335–54).
104. M. Heidegger, *Die Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie,* vol. 24 of Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe,* 377–78.
105. Cf. F. Costa, *Tra mito e filosofia: Bultmann e la teologia contemporanea* (Messina-Firenze: D'Anna, 1978).
106. R. Bultmann, *Jesus* (1926; repr. Tübingen: Mohr, 1977), 28, 38, 25.
107. R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament,* Engl. trans. K. Grobel (London: SCM Press, 1968), 1:9.
108. The existential notion of *Schuld* (fault, guilt, as well as debt) is also essential in Heidegger.
109. Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology,* 77.

110. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament,* 1:329 ff.
111. Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology,* 30 (a book originally written in English and offering an excellent synthesis of the author's ideas).
112. R. Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology, and Other Basic Writings,* ed. S.M. Ogden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 19.
113. On the meanings of the Johannine *logos,* see below, vol. 2, chapter 4, § 3.
114. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit,* § 3, p. 10 (Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe,* 2:13–14).
115. R. Bultmann, *Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1921).
116. The very success of Bultmann's demythologization provoked him to repeat the same recurring motifs frequently.
117. Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology,* 19. This definition of mythology is frequent in Bultmann's writings, starting from his important article "Neues Testament und Mythologie: Das Problem der Entmythologisierung der neutestamentlichen Verkündigung," *Gesellschaft für evangelischen Theologie* 21, no. 4 (1941): 15–48; see particularly Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology,* 9–10.
118. Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology,* 19.
119. Cf. Costa, *Tra mito e filosofia,* 109–12.
120. Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology,* 65.
121. Bultmann, *Jesus,* 13.
122. E. Käsemann, "Das Problem des historischen Jesu," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 51, no. 2 (1954): 125–53.
123. Gaeta, *Il Gesù moderno,* 45–63.
124. According to G. Segalla, *Sulle tracce di Gesù: La "Terza ricerca"* (Assisi: Cittadella, 2006), 151 ff., the previous stages would be the Old Quest, extending from Reimarus up to the beginning of the twentieth century (1778–1906), and the New Quest of the German scholarship between 1953 and 1975, but this division does not reflect the real development of research and puts at the same level works very different in their scientific value: (1) the essential contribution of philosophy between the sixteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth is completely ignored; (2) in particular Strauss, Weiss, and Bultmann are not classifiable among the other researchers of the Old Quest; (3) the phenomenon of the liberal Christ is chronologically distributed in the periods assigned to both the Old and the New Quest time frames. These are sufficient reasons for rejecting this questionable terminology.
125. Strauss, *Das Leben Jesu,* 589 ff.
126. D.F. Strauss, *Das Leben Jesu für das deutsche Volk bearbeitet* (Leipzig: Brodhaus, 1864), 606 ff.
127. This is the opening and provocative definition of Meier 4:1.
128. Meier 4:39–40 (by "semantic" I suppose he means "linguistic").

129. G. Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminar of America, 1965), 65 ff.
130. See vol. 1, chapter 10, § 6.
131. This is the methodological premise of the topic here developed in the Conclusion.
132. See vol. 1, chapter 9, § 3, and n. 88; more widely on these events, see Garbini, *Il ritorno dall'esilio babilonese* (Brescia: Paideia, 2001).
133. It is obvious that the Platonic philosophy was much more influential on Jewish theology than the Epicurean on which Garbini relies for his one-sided reconstruction of Middle Judaism.
134. Cf. de Lubac, *Histoire et Esprit,* 336 ff.; Origen particularly insisted on the allegorical comments on the episode of Transfiguration: J. Daniélou, *Origène* (Paris: Le Table Ronde, 1948), 256–57.

### 2. The Marriage at Cana and the Temple Protest

1. R.E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple: The Life, Loves, and Hates of an Individual Church in New Testament Times* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 31–34.
2. Cf. H. De Lubac, *Histoire et Esprit: L'intelligence de l'Écriture d'après Origène* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2002), 359, though he pays no attention to the Dionysian origin of the symbol.
3. R.E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John,* The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 101–2 (henceforth Brown ed.).
4. Cf. K. Kerényi, *Dionysos: Archetypal Image of Indestructible Life,* Engl. trans. R. Manheim (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 296–301, and V. Macchioro, *Zagreus: Studi intorno all'orfismo.* Edited by C. Pugliese. Milano: Mimesis, 2014, 436–37.
5. Cf. J. Starcky, "Pétra et la Nabaténe," in *Supplément au Dictionnaire de la Bible,* vol. 7 (Paris: Librairie Letouzey et Ané, 1961), col. 998.
6. R. Bultmann, *Das Evangelium des Johannes* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1953), 78–85; the Dionysian parallels are accepted by J. Jeremias, *Neutestamentliche Theologie,* vol. 1, *Die Verkündigung Jesu* (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1971), 92; cf. Euripides, *Bacchae,* ed. E. R. Dodds (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986) (henceforth Dodds ed.), *ad vv.* 704–11, pp. 163–64.
7. Even hastier is R. Schnackenburg, *Das Johannesevangelium* (Freiburg: Herder, 1967–83), 1:343–44.
8. C.H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 225 (after a detailed list of the Dionysian analogies on 224–25).
9. See vol. 1, chapter 10, § 3.
10. See C.H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 10, 33–41, and 54–56.

11. J.P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus,* vol. 2, *Mentor, Message, and Miracles* (New York: Doubleday, 1994) (henceforth Meier 2), 934–50.
12. Brown ed., 194–95: the author reworks Bultmann's theory of the *Semeia-Quelle* as one of the sources of John.
13. Meier 2:950 ff.
14. See Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple,* 56–58 and ff.
15. For the critical debate and the general frame of the saying, see F.J. Moloney, *The Johannine Son of Man* (Roma: LAS, 1978), 23–41.
16. On the different synoptic versions, see R.E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave. A Commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels,* The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 1:484–547; cf. Brown ed., 88–91.
17. See the wide discussion on the synoptic versions in Brown, *The Death of the Messiah,* 1:488–515.
18. G. Boccaccini, *I giudaismi del Secondo Tempio da Ezechiele a Daniele,* It. trans. A. Bardi, rev. and augmented ed. (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2008), 222.
19. O. Cullmann, *Christologie du Nouveau Testament* (1955; repr. Neuchatel-Paris: Delachaux & Niestlé, 1958), 118–31; see also the slightly revised version translated from the German edition (1957), Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament,* Engl. trans. S.C. Guthrie and C.A.M. Hall (London: SCM Press, 1980), 52–60.
20. Cullmann, *Christologie,* 160; the author rightly emphasizes the importance of the Son of man in the fourth Gospel (ibid. 157–63; *The Christology,* 182–88), though with a less satisfactory focus on the Christology of the *Logos* because of his views on the relationship between Judaism and Greek culture, far more advanced than Bultmann's (*Christologie,* 179; *The Christology,* 206) but still limited.
21. On the angelic Christology, see J. Daniélou, *Théologie du Judéo-christianisme: Histoire des doctrines chrétiennes avant Nicée* (Tournai: Desclée, 1958), 169 ff.; M. Simonetti, *Studi sulla cristologia del II e III secolo* (Roma: Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum, 1993), 8–22 and 55–60.
22. On the realized eschatology in Jn 1:51, see B.E. Reynolds, *The Apocalyptic Son of Man in the Gospel of John* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 96–103.
23. On the two theological models in Middle Judaism, see also below, conclusion, § 4.
24. Boccaccini, *I giudaismi del Secondo Tempio,* 195–226.
25. G. Garbini, *Myth and History in the Bible,* Engl. trans. C. Peri (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 76 and 81–82.
26. This connection is lacking in Garbini because of his limited comprehension of the prophetic phenomenon in ancient Israel. Isaiah 7:14 is part of an important sequence deemed authentic by most specialists, though with many interpretive difficulties (J. Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39,* The Anchor Bible [New York: Doubleday, 2000], 229–39).
27. Zc 6:12–13 describes a perfect harmony between monarchy and priesthood but is a clear pleading.
28. To be kept is the substance of the reconstruction in Garbini, *Myth and History in the*

*Bible,* 80–85, leaving aside the question of the historical reality of the Davidic figure (whose tradition could be old but have very little to do with the biblical king).

29. N. Söderblom, *La vie future d'après le Mazdéisme* à la lumière des *croyances parallèles dans les autres religions* (Angers: Burdin, 1901), 291–92 (cf. J. Le Goff, *La naissance du Purgatoire* [Paris: Gallimard, 1981], 54). On the interaction of the prophets with the Persian power and ideology, see G. Garbini, *Scrivere la storia d'Israele: Vicende e memorie ebraiche* (Brescia: Paideia, 2008), 200–203.
30. Boccaccini, *I giudaismi del Secondo Tempio,* 135 ff.; J.A. Soggin, *Storia d'Israele: Introduzione alla storia d'Israele e Giuda dalla fondazione alla rivolta di Bar Kochbà* (Brescia: Paideia, 2002), 363–65.
31. Garbini, *Scrivere la storia d'Israele,* 238–48.
32. Meier 2:100–233.
33. Meier 2:120–27.
34. On the debate cf. F. Fabris, *Gesù il "Nazareno"* (Assisi: Cittadella, 2011), 239–42, with a dubious attempt at finding an intermediate solution.
35. G. Jossa, *Gesù e i movimenti di liberazione della Palestina* (Brescia: Paideia, 1980), 284–85.
36. Meier 2:134–37.
37. For the debate on this title, cf. F.J. Moloney, "Constructing Jesus and the Son of Man," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 75, no. 4 (2013): 719–38.
38. R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament,* Engl. trans. K. Grobel (London: SCM Press, 1968), 1:29–32.
39. Cf. Jossa, *Gesù e i movimenti,* 287.
40. The topic is of course highly controversial: on the debate starting from the reaction against Bultmann and the possible textual basis for Jesus referring to the Suffering Servant, see S. McKnight, *Jesus and His Death: Historiography, the Historical Jesus, and Atonement Theory* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2005), 61–70 and 207–24.
41. Still valid are the analyses of Cullmann, *Christologie,* 48–73 (Cullmann, *The Christology,* 51–82), except for the too literal interpretation of the episode of Jesus's baptism.
42. Cullmann, *Christologie,* 252–55 (Cullmann, *The Christology,* 290–94).
43. Cullmann, *Christologie,* 244–52 (Cullmann, *The Christology,* 281–90).
44. Mt 22:41–45; Mk 12:35–37a; Lk 20:41–44. See Jossa, *Gesù e i movimenti,* 188–94. The tradition arises from Mark and does not answer the criterion of various witness, but satisfies the criteria of dissimilarity (+ similarity) and consistence.
45. On the use of the Hebrew sources in John, cf. Brown ed., cxxix–cxxx.
46. Cf. vol. 1, chapter 8, § 3, 371.
47. See the balanced assessment in Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament,* 2:58–59.
48. See W. Robertson Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (London: Black,

1894), 338 ff. (hypothesis adopted by Freud in *Totem and Taboo*; and above vol. 1, introduction, §§ 2 and 7.

49. See Dodds ed., *ad vv.* 704–11, pp. 163–64, with rich evidence.
50. G. Fornari, *Fra Dioniso e Cristo: La sapienza sacrificale greca e la civiltà occidentale* (Bologna: Pitagora, 2001), 221 ff.
51. See vol. 1, chapter 9, § 3, and particularly notes 53–56; on Anat, a little-known goddess that at some point of the first millennium BC became more important than Asherah, see G. Garbini, *Dio della terra: Dalle religioni semitiche al giudaismo e al cristianesimo* (Brescia: Paideia, 2011), 217–21.
52. Cf. Dodd, *Historical Tradition,* 224.
53. As established by Bultmann, *Das Evangelium des Johannes,* 174–77, of course according to his antisacramental interpretation of John.
54. J. Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus,* Engl. trans. N. Perrin (London-Philadelphia: SCM-Trinity Press, 1990), 138 ff.; Brown ed., 285–91.
55. See above, note 12.
56. Dodd, *Historical Tradition,* 289 ff.; Brown ed., cxxxviii–cxxxix.
57. Meier 2:937 is unduly restrictive, whereas the initial Passion allusion in the very first miracle of the Johannine Jesus perfectly fits the last one, the raising of Lazarus (as Meier 2 shows on 941 ff.).
58. Meier 2:943–44.
59. Dodd, *Historical Tradition,* 227.
60. My reasoning finds full confirmation in the analyses of J.P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus,* vol. 5, *Probing the Authenticity of the Parables* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016) (henceforth Meier 5).
61. Cf. A. Lupieri, *A Commentary on the Apocalypse of John,* Engl. trans. M. Poggi Johnson and A. Kamesar (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 43–44.
62. Meier 5:253–73.
63. The phrase "and his disciples" is lacking in the early manuscripts. The evangelist probably inserted here a connecting sentence taken from one of his sources, creating some textual difficulties, later partially solved with the addition on the disciples (Brown ed., 112–13).
64. G. Garbini, *Dio della terra, dio del cielo: Dalle religioni semitiche al giudaismo e al cristianesimo* (Brescia: Paideia, 2011), 248, 248n1.
65. So we are in a position to overcome any confessional and/or ideological contraposition between paganism and Judaism and at the same time to find out what was really original and creative in the latter.
66. On Mary's mediation and its import in the developments of Christianity, see below vol. 2, chapter 5.
67. On the Tobiads, see M. Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in Their Encounter*

*in Palestine During the Early Hellenistic Period,* Engl. trans. J. Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), 267 ff.

68. On the unreliability of the final version of Nehemiah, cf. Garbini, *Scrivere la storia d'Israele,* 319.
69. The interpreters who do not understand what was at stake behind the cult in the Temple give their preference to the synoptic version and underestimate the Johannine version (like G. Segalla, *Sulle tracce di Gesù: La "Terza ricerca"* [Assisi: Cittadella, 2006], 82 ff.).
70. J.D. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), 357: "It is not at all a purification, but rather a symbolic destruction." The criticism of the cliché of purification in E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 61–71, is acceptable, although the author follows rationalistic explanations without considering the historical meaning of sacrifice in the ancient world.
71. The preposition used in John has a vague meaning, and a conversation near the strong room of the Temple appears more likely (Brown ed., 342): this makes no difference on its symbolic meaning.
72. Brown ed., 357.
73. R. Girard, *Je vois Satan tomber comme l'éclaire* (Paris: Grasset, 2009), 137–40.
74. Cf. G. Fornari, "Immortali/mortali: Il sacrificio in Eraclito," in *Eraclito: la luce dell'Oscuro,* ed. G. Fornari (Firenze: Olschki, 2017), 179–81.
75. Lupieri, *A Commentary on the Apocalypse,* 15.
76. On the historical value of the prohibition, see Segalla, *Sulle tracce di Gesù,* 92–93; on the possible interpretations of the verse, see B.C. Dennert, "Mark 11:16: A Status Quaestionis," *Studies in Jewish-Christian Relations* 5 (2010): 1–7. An explanation will be given below.
77. Useful analyses in Dodd, *Historical Tradition,* 156–62.
78. Cf. Brown ed., 118 (there is general consensus on this point).
79. Ps 69:9.
80. J. Mateos and J. Barreto, *El evangelio de Juan: Analisis lingüistico y comentario exegetico* (Madrid: Ediciones Cristiandad, 1982), 164–65.
81. The verb was traditional to indicate the pilgrimage to Jerusalem (Bultmann, *Das Evangelium des Johannes,* 86n3), but this is not necessarily in contradiction with a typically Johannine overtone.
82. This does not exclude a semantic correspondence: see below, note 81.
83. Jossa, *Gesù e i movimenti,* 136.
84. Dodd, *Historical Tradition,* 157n3.
85. Origen is still embarrassed by the detail and softens it by adding Jesus's miraculous power to throw out all with only one gesture (*In Johannem* X, xxv, 146–149). The reading ὡς φραγέλλιον ("a kind of scourge"), present in the Bodmer papyrus and other manuscripts, probably corresponds to the attempt to soften the aggressive connotation

of this unusual tool (for this reason I do not agree with its adoption by Brown ed., 114–15).

86. The saying is authentic, at least in its first part, according to Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism,* 71–75; cf. Segalla, *Sulle tracce di Gesù,* 90–93.
87. On the parable of the murderous vine growers, see vol. 2, chapter 5, § 2.
88. Brown., *The Death of the Messiah,* 1:438–54.
89. Cf. T.C. Gray, *The Temple in the Gospel of Mark: A Study in Its Narrative Role* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 171–77.
90. On the possible symbolic meaning of the expression used in 2:15, we have to remember the use of the verb φραγελλόω in Mt 27:26 and Mk 15:15, which could come from some materials known also by the fourth evangelist; besides, a direct repetition of the very same term in the Passion narrative would easily have been misleading given that it is Jesus who is whipping the merchants in the Johannine version.
91. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism,* 69–70, speaks of a symbolic action, though without dealing with the historical and religious meaning of the "merchants."
92. Cf. the LXX: "οἱ ἔμποροι αὐτῆς ἔνδοξοι, ἄρχοντες τῆς γῆς"; and the *Vulgata:* "cuius negotiatores principes, institores eius incliti terrae."
93. Cf. Lupieri, *A Commentary on the Apocalypse,* 294–95.
94. Garbini, *Scrivere la storia d'Israele,* 194–95.
95. The Targum and the Greek version of Aquila read "merchants" while the Septuagint reads "Canaanites."
96. Ignoring the drama concealed behind the text, many exegetes do not accept the symbolic reading, but the literal meaning does not give any sense, while the allegorical one is perfect for the last sentence of the book. It is worth mentioning Baruch Spinoza, who in his *Tractatus theologico-politicus,* ch. 3, cites the Canaanites as an example of a people who received the prophetic gift but then lost it because of their own corruption.
97. The Hebrew text had the pronoun in the third singular person, not at the first singular as the present Masoretic text, that has little sense as referring to Yahweh (Brown ed., 938). I indulge in the hypothesis that this is a personal translation made by the evangelist.
98. Garbini, *Scrivere la storia d'Israele,* 90 and 193–94.
99. On the use of this quotation from Zechariah in the gospels, see M.J.J. Menken, "Striking the Shepherd: Early Christian Versions and Interpretations of Zechariah 13,7," *Biblica* 92, no. 1 (2011): 39–59.
100. On the contrary, the passage ought to be considered a further confirmation of the historical value of the title.
101. Jossa, *Gesù e i movimenti,* 77–94.
102. Jossa, *Gesù e i movimenti,* 69.
103. Cf. Schnackenburg, *Das Johannesevangelium,* 2:362.
104. For a balanced reconstruction, see Jossa, *Gesù e i movimenti,* 33–94.

105. On the *status quaestionis,* see J.R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1–20,* The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 57–63.
106. The euphemistic translation "burn incense" is unacceptable: the verb has a sacrificial technical meaning (cf. R. Di Giuseppe, "Nascita della filosofia dallo spirito del sacrificio," in Fornari, *Eraclito,* 117–20).
107. Translation based on *Septuaginta id est Vetus Testamentum graece iuxta LXX interpretes,* ed. A. Rahlfs (Stuttgart: Bibelgesellschaft, 1979).
108. G. Garbini, *Il ritorno dall'esilio babilonese* (Brescia: Paideia, 2001), 162–72.
109. Gray, *The Temple in the Gospel of Mark,* 28–30.
110. Brown ed., 108–9.
111. Brown ed., 107–8.
112. Mainly the candelabrum (Zc 4:1–2) and the divine knights (1:7–8), besides others.
113. Cf. Lupieri, *A Commentary on the Apocalypse,* 207–8.
114. Brown connects the "hour" only to the final manifestation of the Passion (Brown ed., 99–100), but it is not clear why this reading has to be exclusive rather than inclusive, given that the manifestation of the Son always starts from the beginning of his public mission.
115. For a critical discussion of this attitude, see Schnackenburg, *Das Johannesevangelium,* 1:332 ff.
116. The objection of Brown who finds such interpretations "farfetched" (Brown ed., 100) is rationalistic: the numerical allegories were nothing new in the ancient world nor in the Judaic culture.
117. Brown ed., 100.
118. Mateos and Barreto, *El evangelio de Juan,* 151–52.
119. Cf. Brown ed., 104.
120. The Eucharistic symbolism is part of the narration, and probably Brown gives less importance to this theme because of his exclusion of the comparative problem, though he observes significant analogies inside the Johannine gospel (Brown ed., 109–10).
121. As in other cases, this must be explained by some points of contact among the several traditions.
122. Mateos and Barreto, *El evangelio de Juan,* 153–54.
123. See Meier 2:943–44.
124. This interpretation is plausible also for Meier 2:1017n234.
125. On the translation, see vol. 1, chapter 5, § 2, 272 and 279–80.
126. Brown ed., 469.
127. My translation means to recognize a distinction between the worldly existence (ψυχή) from the eternal ζωέ.
128. Brown ed., 466 (cf. 314).
129. Brown rejects any connection of this sort (Brown ed., 472), not realizing that exactly

the "immutable character" of the Mysteries cycle gives further meaning to the episode of the Resurrection.

### 3. The Enigma of the Eucharist in the Fourth Gospel

1. A. de Tocqueville, *De la démocratie en Amérique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), 1:40.
2. De Tocqueville, *De la démocratie en Amérique,* 2:452.
3. R. Bultmann, *Das Evangelium des Johannes* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1953), 161–77 (and the *Ergänzungsheft* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966], 28–30). Bultmann's reading was preceded by A. Loisy, *Les mystères païens et le mystère chrétien* (Paris, 1930), 287 ff.
4. Cf. R.E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John,* The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1966) (henceforth Brown ed.), 286.
5. O. Cullmann, *Les Sacrements dans l'Évangile johannique: La vie de Jesus et le culte de l'Église primitive* (Paris: Les Presses Universitaires de France, 1951); also see below, note 9).
6. J. Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus,* Engl. trans. N. Perrin (London-Philadelphia: SCM-Trinity Press, 1990) (henceforth Jeremias 1990), 125–37; this part has been put before the chapter on the oldest Eucharistic texts though it was its first paragraph in the previous edition, Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus,* Engl. trans. A. Ehrhardt (Oxford: Blackwell, 1955) (henceforth Jeremias 1955), 72–87.
7. The same explanation for the apparent absence of the Eucharist in Hebrews is given in Jeremias 1990, 132.
8. Cf. M. Simonetti, *Il Vangelo e la storia: Il cristianesimo antico (secc. I–IV)* (Roma: Carocci, 2010), 43.
9. See the review of Cullmann's book on the Johannine doctrine of sacraments, C.H. Dodd, "Les Sacrements dans l'Évangile johannique. La vie de Jesus et le culte de l'Église primitive. *By Oscar Cullmann,*" Études *d'Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuses par la Faculté de Théologie Protestante de l'Université de Strasbourg* 42 (1952): 218.
10. C.H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 338–39 and 411–12.
11. Cf. Brown ed., 570–72 and 284–91.
12. Jeremias 1990, 198–201 (these considerations must be evaluated leaving aside the author's interpretation of the Last Supper as a Passover meal; cf. the less developed treatment in Jeremias 1955, 140–41).
13. The idea to translate λόγος as *Comunicazione* is in S. Grasso, *Il Vangelo di Giovanni: Commento esegetico e teologico* (Roma: Città Nuova, 2008), 33 ff. Already Brown ed., 24, speaks of "a divine communication."
14. Brown ed., 18–23; R. Schnackenburg, *Das Johannesevangelium* (Freiburg: Herder, 1967–83), 1:205 ff.
15. Brown ed., 19–20.
16. Even as good a historical study on Christology as Cullmann's defines the Greek

influence on the Johannine *Logos* as merely formal (O. Cullmann, *Christologie du Nouveau Testament* [1955; repr. Neuchatel-Paris: Delachaux & Niestlé, 1958], 218–20; Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament,* Engl. trans. S.C. Guthrie and C.A.M. Hall [London: SCM Press, 1980], 251–54), without seeing the profundity of a speculative confrontation with Greek philosophy.

17. M. Heidegger, *Einführung in die Metaphysik* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1987), 103 (vol. 40 of Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe* [Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1983], 143).
18. G. Fornari, "Discese agli inferi: La Giustizia nella *Repubblica* di Platone," in *La giustizia dei greci tra riflessione filosofica e prassi giudiziaria,* ed. C. Bearzot and E. Vimercati (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 2013), 24–47.
19. Plato, *Republic,* 509b, 5–9. The passage has been inserted among Plato's passages pertaining to the Unwritten Doctrines, the most esoteric part of Plato's teaching (G. Reale, *Autotestimonianze e rimandi dei Dialoghi di Platone alle "Dottrine non scritte"* [Milano: Bompiani, 2008], 400–403); I accept the presence of a double-level reading in Plato's dialogues, but I do not agree at all with the metaphysical reading pursued by Reale, whose concept of metaphysics is ahistorical and devoid of any real connection with Plato's political thought: this is a Neoplatonic, not a Platonic reading of Plato.
20. On the influence of Plato's passage on Celsus and Origen, and their different interpretations, see J. Daniélou, *Origène* (Paris: Le Table Ronde, 1948), 115–17.
21. *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker,* ed. H. Diels and W. Kranz (Berlin: Weidmann, 1972–74), 28-B2, l. 3 (on ὁδός, see B1–2).
22. Origen used this argument in *Contra Celsum,* VII, 38 and 42, as answer to the Middle-Platonic Celsus and making reference to Plato's passage (Daniélou, *Origène,* 116–17).
23. One of the few exegetes who attributes v. 14 to the fourth evangelist is E. Käsemann, "Aufbau und Anliegen des johanneischen Prologs," in *Libertas Christiana: Delekat Festschrift* (München: Kaiser, 1957), 75–99. On the interpretive debate, see Brown ed., 30–35 (a discussion not taking into account any meaningful influence from Greek thought).
24. Heidegger, *Einführung in die Metaphysik,* 103 (Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe,* 40:143).
25. R. Girard, *Des choses cachées depuis la foundation du monde: Recherches avec Jean-Michel Oughourlian et Guy Lefort* (Paris: Grasset, 1991), 377–89.
26. G. Fornari, *Da Dioniso a Cristo: Conoscenza e sacrificio nel mondo greco e nella civiltà occidentale* (Genova-Milano: Marietti, 2006), 246–47.
27. R.E. Brown, *An Introduction to New Testament Christology* (New York-Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1994), 105–52.
28. This partially corresponds to the different Christological aspects distinguished in Cullmann, *Christologie.*
29. Brown, *An Introduction to New Testament Christology,* 117–21 (synoptics), 133–36 and 175–77 (Paul), 185–87 (Hebrews).
30. Brown, *An Introduction to New Testament Christology,* 84–85 (but cf. 124–25).
31. Against a positivist and evolutionistic view see J.P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking*

*the Historical Jesus,* vol. 2, *Mentor, Message, and Miracles* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 918–19.

32. The Greek philosophical influence on the passage is widely commented in G. Garbini, *Il vangelo aramaico di Matteo e altri saggi* (Brescia: Paideia, 2017), 16 ff., but unjustifiably ignores the decisive role of Plato's philosophy.
33. Brown, *An Introduction to New Testament Christology,* 135.
34. Brown, *An Introduction to New Testament Christology,* 136n198.
35. Cf. C. Marcheselli-Casale, *Lettera agli Ebrei: Nuova versione, introduzione e commento* (Milano: Paoline, 2005), 665–80.
36. See above, vol. 2, chapter 3, § 2.
37. Cf. A. Dempf, *Sacrum Imperium: Geschichts- und Staatsphilosophie des Mittelalters und der politischen Renaissance* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgemeinschaft, 1954), 285 ff. and 473 (the author does not entirely grasp the whole mystic import of Christic mediation in St. Francis and Dante, but his analyses remain essential).
38. As in Bultmann, *Das Evangelium des Johannes,* 9–10, 38 ff., according to his wrong thesis of the Gnostic influence on John.
39. The interpretation of R. Girard, *Le bouc* émissaire (Paris: Grasset, 1982), 304–11, is based on the judicial metaphor.
40. Bultmann's analysis is of some help here, except for his refusal to take into account Jesus's all-encompassing role as mediator and the objectual import of his proclamation of the Kingdom of God.
41. Brown ed., 512–13.
42. Brown ed., 513–14.
43. G. Jossa, *Gesù e i movimenti di liberazione della Palestina* (Brescia: Paideia, 1980), 324–29.
44. F.J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1998).
45. Cf. Dodd, *The Interpretation,* 419–20.
46. I interpret the aorist tense as deliberative.
47. The subject is omitted as a sign of veneration toward the *nomen divinum,* in the moment when Jesus is manifesting his full glory.
48. Strong expression meaning indwelling in a theological and saving sense.
49. It is necessary to render the word with "grace" in a soteriological acceptation, though still without the complications of the later Christian debate. To translate "joy" would sound too psychological and unrealistic given the imminent "hour."
50. To translate φίλοι with "friends" is weak: these φίλοι are the human beings that are object of the Son's *philein* and its transitive power.
51. R.E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple: The Life, Loves, and Hates of an Individual Church in New Testament Times* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 94–96.
52. C. Spicq, *Agapè dans le Nouveau Testament: Analyse des textes,* vol. 3 (Paris: Gabalda, 1959), 163 ff. and 220.

53. R.B. Onians, *The Origins of European Thought about the Body, the Mind, the Soul, the World, Time, and Fate: New Interpretations of Greek, Roman and Kindred Evidence also of Some Basic Jewish and Christian Beliefs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 109 ff.
54. S. Weil, Œuvres *complètes,* vol. 6, *Cahiers,* part 3 (Paris: Gallimard, 2002), 57 (cf. 62 and 67–68).
55. Brown ed., 672–74.

### 4. Sacrifice, Myth, and Exegesis in Christianity

1. The probable historicity of the Eucharistic narratives is admitted also in J.P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus,* vol. 1, *The Roots of the Problem and the Person* (New York: Doubleday, 1991) (henceforth Meier 1), 399.
2. J. Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus,* Engl. trans. N. Perrin (London-Philadelphia: SCM-Trinity Press, 1990) (henceforth Jeremias 1990), 96–100 and 186–89.
3. Meier 1:401–2.
4. See, as representative of this tendency, R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament,* Engl. trans. K. Grobel (London: SCM Press, 1968), 1:144–52.
5. On this passage, see L. Walt, *Paolo e le parole di Gesù: Frammenti di un insegnamento orale* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2013), 327–29.
6. On the narrow limits in using later Hebrew sources for reconstruction regarding the historical Jesus, cf. J.P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus,* vol. 3, *Companions and Competitors* (New York: Doubleday, 2001) (henceforth Meier 3), 305–10.
7. Cf. Jeremias 1990, 225–27.
8. See vol. 1, chapter 9, § 3.
9. For a short history of the concept, see H. Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 21–42.
10. E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 66–68.
11. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism,* 333 (and, more widely, 331–34).
12. Jeremias 1990, 207–18.
13. F. Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke: Kritischen Studienausgabe,* ed. G. Colli and M. Montinari (Berlin-New York: De Gruyter, 1980) (henceforth NSW), 13:589, 22[14].
14. Cf. K. Löwith, *Nietzsches Philosophie der ewigen Wiederkehr des Gleichen* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1986), 126 and 182.
15. NSW, 13:541–42 and 544–45; 611–12, 23[10].
16. See the notes in NSW, 13:579–80.
17. NSW, 13:531, 18[1]; 641, 25[7].
18. Compare this line to Goethe's *Faust* 11997: "Höchste Herrscherin der Welt!," on which, see vol. 2, chapter 6, § 7.
19. NSW, 6:404–5.

20. G. Garbini, *Dio della terra, dio del cielo: Dalle religioni semitiche al giudaismo e al cristianesimo* (Brescia: Paideia, 2011), 252–53 and 257.
21. I shall analyze this passage more widely in vol. 2, chapter 8, § 2.
22. Jeremias 1990, 184.
23. See the full analysis in Jeremias 1990, 237–62, which closes his inquiry.
24. In the sense that Jesus was thinking of the Judaic resurrection he believed in.
25. Jeremias 1990, 226–29.
26. Meier 3:64–67.
27. Cf. R. Fabris, *Gesù il "Nazareno"* (Assisi: Cittadella, 2011), 657–59; many historical-critical studies deem Lk 9:44 the most historical version of the saying: F.J. Moloney, "Constructing Jesus and the Son of Man," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 75, no. 4 (2013): 727n44. F. Bovon, *L'Évangile selon Saint Luc 1–9* (Genève: Labor et Fides, 1991), 506–7, explains the omission of the Resurrection with the Lucan will to highlight the incomprehension of the disciples and defines the saying as an enigma, but this is a further detail compatible with the historical origin of the *logion.*
28. Cf. F. Büchsel, *s.v.* παραδίδωμι in *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament,* ed. G. Kittel (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1933–), 2:171–74. This verb is connected to the Son of man and his passion already in the presynoptic tradition: see N. Perrin, "Die Christologie des Markus-Evangeliums: Eine metodologische Studie," in *Das Markus-Evangelium,* ed. R. Pesch (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1979), 369–71.
29. On the *passivum divinum,* see J. Jeremias, *Neutestamentliche Theologie,* vol. 1, *Die Verkündigung Jesu* (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1971), 20–24.
30. J.P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus,* vol. 5, *Probing the Authenticity of the Parables* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016) (henceforth Meier 5), 240–53.
31. Among the infinite comments on the parable, see J. Jeremias, *Die Gleichnisse Jesu* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1965), 67–75; A.J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 351–82.
32. This is the proper translation of Meier 5:240.
33. Meier 5:48–56 and 199–209.
34. R. Girard, *Le bouc* émissaire (Paris: Grasset, 1982), 274–84.
35. R.E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John,* The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1966) (henceforth Brown ed.), 385–86 and 723.
36. With a folk-tale method of *amplificatio* typical of the second evangelist (Jeremias, *Die Gleichnisse Jesu,* 68–69). Cf. J. Gnilka, *Das Evangelium nach Markus* (Mannheim: Patmos Verlag, 2010), 146; nevertheless, to be rejected is the author's attribution of the text to a pre-Marcan source and not to the historical Jesus without further argument (ibid., 148–49).
37. As stressed in C. Spicq, *Agapè dans le Nouveau Testament: Analyse des textes* (Paris: Gabalda, 1959), 1:90–95, though in too concordist a fashion.

38. C.S. Mann, *Mark,* The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1986), 464, accepts the eschatological connotation of καιρός but does not mention the term ἔσχατον that is its necessary correlative; Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus,* 368, recognizes the eschatological connotation of the second term without giving the same semantic import to the first. A complete recognition of the strong import of the two words is in T.C. Gray, *The Temple in the Gospel of Mark: A Study in Its Narrative Role* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 64 and 66.
39. The thesis of the authenticity of the scriptural quotation from Psalm 118 is argued by G.R. Lanier, "The Rejected Stone in the Parable of the Wicked Tenants: Defending the Authenticity of Jesus' Quotation of Ps 118:22," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 56, no. 4 (2013): 733–51, but most scholars deem it a Marcan addition: anyway it is to be considered a pertinent gloss.
40. A fashionable interpretation whose weakness results also from its usual disregard of the clear Gnostic import of the work (this does not lessen, of course, its importance as testimony of the redactional history of the canonical texts).
41. An immediate reference is to the prophets often called by the term δοῦλος (Gray, *The Temple in the Gospel of Mark,* 64–65).
42. The idea is in M. Grosso, *Vangelo secondo Tommaso* (Roma: Carocci, 2011), 206–7 (and finally it goes against the author's thesis of the anteriority of *Thomas*'s gospel).
43. Cf. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus,* 365–66. A much wider demonstration, closely historical-critical, is in Meier 5:89–188.
44. Spicq, *Agapè dans le Nouveau Testament,* 1:90.
45. Meier 5:250.
46. Meier 5:251.
47. Meier 5:252–53.
48. Cf. Mann, *Mark,* 466.
49. F. Zorell, *Lexicon Graecum Novi Testamenti* (1960; repr. Roma: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1990), *s.v.* γωνία, col. 270.
50. Gray, *The Temple in the Gospel of Mark,* 68–77.
51. Gray, *The Temple in the Gospel of Mark,* 75.
52. Gray, *The Temple in the Gospel of Mark,* 76.
53. Gray, *The Temple in the Gospel of Mark,* 179–80, attributes to Mark the idea of Resurrection as New Temple, which is true from an ecclesiastical and eschatological viewpoint, but then the problem was to interpret the present with the *parousia* still to come. For this reason, the realized eschatology of John was a theological advance.
54. Gray, *The Temple in the Gospel of Mark,* 172–73.
55. E. Lupieri, *A Commentary on the Apocalypse of John,* Engl. trans. M. Poggi Johnson and A. Kamesar (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 18, 28–31, 146–47, 219, 247, 270–72, and 274 (cf. p. 335).
56. In several writings Girard makes reference to the parable and in particular the

quote from Psalm 118 (R. Girard, *Des choses cachées depuis la foundation du monde: Recherches avec Jean-Michel Oughourlian et Guy Lefort* [Paris: Grasset, 1991], 263–65).

57. Brown ed., 335–36.
58. Cf. Brown ed., 336. It is interesting to note that the episode is completely cut without any discussion in R. Bultmann, *Das Evangelium des Johannes* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1953), 236, and relegated to a short appendix in J. Mateos and J. Barreto, *El evangelio de Juan: Analisis lingüistico y comentario exegetico* (Madrid: Ediciones Cristiandad, 1982), 925–26: in this way philology decided to exclude a traditional pericope without any consideration of content.
59. The further connotation of a keystone cannot be excluded from the semantic spectrum of the expression, and the scriptural and exegetic traditions also include this acceptation: see e.g. J. Dupont, Études sur les *Actes des Apôtres* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1967), 301–2.
60. G. Fornari, "Immortali/mortali: Il sacrificio in Eraclito," in *Eraclito: la luce dell'Oscuro,* ed. G. Fornari (Firenze: Olschki, 2017), 170–71.
61. See vol. 1, chapter 10, § 7.
62. M. Hengel, *The Cross of the Son of God,* Engl. trans. J. Bowden (London: SCM, 1986), 207. The translation has been modified according to the shorter original German text Hengel, "Der stellvertretende Sühnetod Jesu: Ein Beitrag zur Entstehung des urchristlichen Kerygmas," *Internationale Katholische Zeitschrift* 2 (1980): 7, where the author speaks of *gemeinantiken "religiösen Koine,"* not of "the religions of *late* antiquity" as the English edition wrongly writes (emphasis mine).
63. M. Liverani, *Oltre la Bibbia: Storia antica d'Israele* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2004), 283 ff.
64. Liverani, *Oltre la Bibbia,* 16–20.
65. T. Römer, *L'invention de Dieu* (Paris: Seuil, 2014), 136–37 and 145–48 (see above, vol. 1, chapter 10, note 71); in the episode the cult is established in honor of Yahweh: see M. Priotto, *Esodo: Nuova versione, introduzione e commento* (Milano: Edizioni Paoline, 2014), 581. Cf. J.A. Soggin, *Storia d'Israele: Introduzione alla storia d'Israele e Giuda dalla fondazione alla rivolta di Bar Kochbà* (Brescia: Paideia, 2002), 258.
66. On the myth of the Flood, cf. Girard, *Des choses cachées,* 217–18.
67. See H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1994), 3–88.
68. G. Boccaccini, *I giudaismi del Secondo Tempio da Ezechiele a Daniele,* It. trans. A. Bardi, rev. and augmented ed. (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2008), 7–58; cf. P. Schäfer, *Die Geburt des Judentums aus dem Geist der Christentums: Fünf Vorlesungen zur Entstehung des rabbinischem Judentums* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010).
69. S.G.F. Brandon, *Jesus and the Zealots: A Study of the Political Factor in Primitive Christianity* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1967).
70. Meier 3:289–388.
71. See especially Boccaccini, *I giudaismi del Secondo Tempio,* 47–53.
72. Cf. C. Della Casa, *Il giainismo* (1962; repr. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 1993), 69,

69n2 (the author deems it probable that the biblical text is older but he still makes reference to the old documentary theory).

73. A. Manzoni, *Tutte le opere,* ed. M. Martelli (Firenze: Sansoni, 1973), 1:89.
74. Manzoni, *Tutte le opere,* 2:1341.
75. John uses materials common also to the synoptic tradition: the text is formally closer to Luke, but the mention of Jesus's mother is common with Mark and Matthew (Brown ed., 271). On Jesus's familial relationships, see below, vol. 2, chapter 6, § 2.
76. Lk 4:28–30. The commentators do not understand well the reasons for the audience reaction, but acknowledge that there is a lynching, modeled upon the example of Stephen's martyrdom (G. Rossé, *Il Vangelo di Luca: Commento esegetico e teologico* [Roma: Città Nuova, 1992], 160–61).
77. Cf. H. de Lubac, *Histoire et Esprit: L'intelligence de l'Écriture d'après Origène* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2002), 208–12.
78. See vol. 1, chapter 10, §1.
79. See below chapter 6, § 2.

### 5. Mary's Mediation

1. Cf. M. Eliade, *Traité d'histoire des religions* (Paris: Payot, 1949), §§ 63 and 67, pp. 172–73 and 177–79.
2. I shall deal with the religious and objectual meaning of the Greek cult of Asclepius in the Conclusion with reference to Euripides's *Alcestis* and the idea of resurrection. Cf. W. Burkert, *Greek Religion,* Engl. trans. J. Raffan (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 201 and 267–68.
3. On the mutual (or failed, in tragedy) complementarity between genders in ancient Greece, see G. Fornari, *La conoscenza tragica in Euripide e in Sofocle* (Massa: Transeuropa, 2013), 191–96, 219–52, and 281–303.
4. For an overview of the problem and the modern interpretive debate, see L. Cova, *Peccato originale: Agostino e il Medioevo* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2014), 39 ff.
5. C. Gianotto, *Giacomo, fratello di Gesù* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2013), particularly 26–34.
6. G. Garbini, *Il vangelo aramaico di Matteo e altri saggi* (Brescia: Paideia, 2017), 271–74.
7. On the interpretive debate, with an attempt to read the scene in sociological terms, see M. Rescio, *La famiglia alternativa di Gesù: Discepolato e strategie di formazione sociale nel Vangelo di Marco* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2012), 105–23.
8. D.F. Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined,* ed. P.C. Hodgson (London: SCM, 1973), 108–18; cf. A. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede,* Engl. trans. W. Montgomery (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 81.
9. The episode answers the criteria of various witness, being present both in Mark and in Q (cf. J.P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus,* vol. 1, *The Roots of the Problem and the Person* [New York: Doubleday, 1991] [henceforth Meier 1],

306n 124), consistency with other teachings of Jesus and the beliefs of his time, and dissimilarity as is provocative and allusive to an implied Christology.

10. J.D. Crossan, "Mark and the Relatives of Jesus," *Novum Testamentum* 15 (1973): 81–113; Rescio, *La famiglia alternativa di Gesù,* 119–20.
11. Meier 1:324–32.
12. On the two interpretive traditions, see Gianotto, *Giacomo,* 120–34.
13. R.E. Brown, *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (New York: Paulist Press, 1973), 65–66; on the historical evidence in the second century, see ibid., 47–52.
14. This viewpoint is strongly held, together with the explanation of the first *adelphoi* as cousins, in J. Blinzler, *Die Brüder und Schwestern Jesu* (Stuttgart: Katholische Bibelwerk, 1967).
15. Meier 1:326–27.
16. Aristotle, *De generatione animalium* 736b; cf. G. Fornari, *Leonardo e la crisi del Rinascimento* (Milano-Udine: Mimesis, 2019), 364.
17. Sexual intercourse in such a state entails a high probability of generating drunkard children according to Plutarch, *De liberis educandis* 3.
18. Fornari, *Leonardo e la crisi del Rinascimento,* 364–65.
19. L.I. Scipioni, *Nestorio e il concilio di Efeso: Storia dogma critica* (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 1974), 70 ff.
20. Scipioni, *Nestorio e il concilio di Efeso,* 220–21.
21. Brown, *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection,* 61–62.
22. As stressed in R. Girard, *Des choses cachées depuis la foundation du monde: Recherches avec Jean-Michel Oughourlian et Guy Lefort* (Paris: Grasset, 1991), 319–23.
23. The Hebrew term *alma* is rather puzzling, leading some interpreters to think of an ancient *hieros gamos;* besides, according to the Judaic hermeneutic tradition it does not correspond to the notion of *virgo intacta,* for which the proper term would be *betula,* though the Christian interpretation appears to be in continuity with the Jewish use of the Bible for "generating new and multiple meanings and appropriations in the course of the life cycle of the same texts" (J. Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39,* The Anchor Bible [New York: Doubleday, 2000], 233–34).
24. G. Delling, *s.v.* παρθένος, in *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament,* ed. G. Kittel (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1933–), 5:824–35.
25. D. Arasse, *L'annonciation italienne: Une histoire de perspective* (Paris: Hazan, 1999); Fornari, *Leonardo e la crisi del Rinascimento,* 525–64.
26. Meier 1:223–25.
27. Meier 1:227–29, denies a possible allusion to Jesus's birth as theologically anachronistic, but he must assume that (1) the rumors of Jesus's illegitimate birth of were impossible at John's time, whereas Meier himself conjecturally explains them as an answer to the Infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke; and (2) a double-level allusion is to be excluded in as subtle a theologian as the fourth evangelist.

28. R.E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John,* The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1966) (henceforth Brown ed.), 11–12.
29. There are instances of the vocative *gynai* in classical Greek—cf. Euripides, *Medea* 290; Homer, *Odyssey,* VII, 347, etc.—but without the Johannine emphasis that becomes theological.
30. Cf. Brown, *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection,* 65–66.
31. R.E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple: The Life, Loves, and Hates of an Individual Church in New Testament Times* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 114–16 and 163.
32. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple,* 123–27.
33. Brown ed., 24–25.
34. Brown ed., 924–27. See also Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave. A Commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels,* The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 2:1019–26.
35. G. Garbini, *Dio della terra, dio del cielo: Dalle religioni semitiche al giudaismo e al cristianesimo* (Brescia: Paideia, 2011), 251–58 and 282.
36. Cf. K. Kerényi, *Dionysos: Archetypal Image of Indestructible Life*, Engl. trans. R. Manheim (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), xxxii–xxxvii.
37. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple,* 61–62, 90, 131–35 (see also below, note 38).
38. A good analysis is presented in C. Spicq, *Agapè dans le Nouveau Testament: Analyse des textes,* vol. 3 (Paris: Gabalda, 1959), 288–92.
39. The opposition *eros*/*agape* theorized by Nygren (to which Spicq's work is a response) follows a typical antimediatory thesis emptying the Christian *agape* of its object and appearing to be unsatisfactory for a theology completely based on mediation like John's: see A. Nygren, *Eros and Agape,* Engl. trans. P.S. Watson (London: SPCK, 1982), 146–59, where the Johannine conception of God as *agape* (1 Jn 4:8) is highly commended but also criticized as dualistic because of "a somewhat uncertain position between unmotivated and motivated love" (ibid., 152).
40. G. Fornari, *Fra Dioniso e Cristo: La sapienza sacrificale greca e la civiltà occidentale* (Bologna: Pitagora, 2001), 237–38; and, in a more nuanced and theological way, Fornari, *Da Dioniso a Cristo: Conoscenza e sacrificio nel mondo greco e nella civiltà occidentale* (Genova-Milano: Marietti, 2006), 273–74.
41. Cf. for some technical details, Brown, *The Death of the Messiah,* 1:286–89, which misses the point of collective violence but confirms the historicity of the Marcan and Matthean version on 309.
42. Cf. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah,* 1:289–91.
43. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah,* 1:291–93.
44. M. Hengel, *The Cross of the Son of God,* Engl. trans. J. Bowden (London: SCM, 1986), 255.

45. On Origen's angelology, see J. Daniélou, *Origène* (Paris: Le Table Ronde, 1948), 221–22 and 235–39.
46. Cf. G. Gnoli, "Le religioni dell'Iran antico e Zoroastro," in *Storia delle religioni,* ed. G. Filoramo, vol. 1, *Le religioni antiche* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1994), 491–92.
47. See vol. 1, chapter 10, § 7.
48. The episode is stylistically Lucan and marks a high point in the theological edifice of the third Gospel: cf. J.A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke,* The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 2:1507–9.
49. The most important example is Albrecht Dürer's *Jesus among the Doctors,* derived from an idea by Leonardo da Vinci (G. Fornari, *La bellezza e il nulla: L'antropologia cristiana di Leonardo da Vinci* [Genova-Milano: Marietti, 2005], 453–56).
50. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah,* 1:86–92.
51. Brown ed., 809–10, denies "a note of contempt" in the arrest scene while admitting it at 1:46.
52. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple,* 66–68 (and elsewhere).
53. Cf. Brown ed., 841–42; Fornari, *La bellezza e il nulla,* 350.
54. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus,* 85–89.
55. Besides, we must not forget the common belief in ancient cultures that there was in the body another spirit responsible for sexual excitement: R.B. Onians, *The Origins of European Thought about the Body, the Mind, the Soul, the World, Time, and Fate: New Interpretations of Greek, Roman and Kindred Evidence also of Some Basic Jewish and Christian Beliefs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 146n5.
56. C. Marucci, *Parole di Gesù sul divorzio: Ricerche scritturistiche previe ad un ripensamento teologico, canonistico e pastorale della dottrina cattolica dell'indissolubilità del matrimonio* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 1982); J.P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus,* vol. 4, *Law and Love* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 95–128.
57. See vol. 1, chapter 2, § 4.
58. Cf. F. Heiler, "The Madonna as Religious Symbol," in *The Mystic Vision: Papers from the Eranos Yearbooks,* ed. J. Campbell, Engl. trans. R. Manheim (Princeton: Princeton University Press, Princeton 1968), 360–65.
59. Heiler, "The Madonna as Religious Symbol," 365–66.
60. See above, vol. 1, chapter 3, § 6 and note 103.
61. *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker,* ed. H. Diels and W. Kranz (Berlin: Weidmann, 1972–74) (henceforth DK), 28-B1, ll. 22–32.
62. This interpretation has been advanced in W. Burkert, "Das Proömium des Parmenides und die Katabasis des Pythagoras," *Phronesis* 14 (1969): 1–30; and subsequently developed by P. Kingsley, *In the Dark Places of Wisdom* (London: Duckworth, 1999), 94 ff., and G. Cerri, "La riscoperta del vero Parmenide," introduction to Parmenide, *Poema sulla natura,* ed. by G. Cerri (1999; repr. Milano: Rizzoli, 2006), 107–8; more recently R. Di Giuseppe, *Le voyage de Parménide* (Paris: Orizons, 2011), 170 ff.

63. On the Orphic meaning of this gesture, see Kingsley, *In the Dark Places of Wisdom,* 63–64.
64. On a mystic interpretation of the term *kouros,* see Kingsley, *In the Dark Places of Wisdom,* 71–76, 101–3, 168–69, and 216–19.
65. DK 28-B2, l. 5.
66. Fornari, *Da Dioniso a Cristo,* 108–16; Fornari, *Storicità radicale: Filosofia e morte di Dio* (Massa: Transeuropa, 2013), 574–75.
67. Cf. Di Giuseppe, *Le voyage de Parménide,* 210–16.
68. Fornari, *Storicità radicale,* 594–607.
69. DK 28-B3, l. 26.
70. On which cf. Kingsley, *In the Dark Places of Wisdom,* 39–45.
71. Dante, *Inferno,* III, 20–21; D. Alighieri, *La commedia,* ed. A. Lanza (Anzio: De Rubeis, 1996), 23. Besides the influence of classical sources, there was a more direct influence from Egypt on the medieval eschatology via the rich religious literature coming from that country (J. Le Goff, *La naissance du Purgatoire* [Paris: Gallimard, 1981], 34–35).
72. Dante, *Inferno,* I, 2; Alighieri, *La commedia,* 5.
73. Dante, *Inferno,* II, 52–57; Alighieri, *La commedia,* 17.
74. Dante, *Inferno,* II, 70–74; Alighieri, *La commedia,* 19, with an intervention: it is necessary to capitalize Love (*Amore*).
75. Dante, *Inferno,* II, 103; Alighieri, *La commedia,* 20.
76. Dante, *Inferno,* II, 85–93; Alighieri, *La commedia,* 19–20.
77. Dante, *Inferno,* II, 94–96; Alighieri, *La commedia,* 20.
78. Dante, *Purgatorio,* XXV, 34–108.
79. G. Fornari, "Mediazione trinitaria: Oggetto salvifico e dimensione estetica in Dante," in *Disordine e ordine: Il fattore mimetico in politica e nella storia,* Proceedings of the COVER Meeting, Salina, June 14–18, 2011, ed. F. Mercadante et al. (Milano: Giuffrè, 2012), 423–38 and 446.
80. Fornari, "Mediazione trinitaria," 439–45.
81. Cf. A. Pincherle, *s.v.* "Agostino," in *Enciclopedia Dantesca* (Milano: A. Mondadori, 2005), 6:126–29.
82. See J.W. Goethe, "Italienische Reise," in Goethe, *Werke,* vol. 11, ed. E. Trunz and H. von Einem (München: Beck, 1989), 380–81, where his position is ironically clear.
83. G. Fornari, "I ciottoli di Don Abbondio: Lettura figurale dei 'Promessi sposi,'" in *Identità e desiderio: La teoria mimetica e la letteratura italiana,* ed. P. Antonello and G. Fornari (Massa: Transeuropa, 2009), 103–42.
84. J.W. Goethe, *Faust,* V, 11997–12004; Goethe, *Werke,* vol. 3, ed. E. Trunz (München: Beck, 1989), 361.
85. This is the proper orthography (Goethe, *Werke,* 3:364).

86. A proper connection to Mary is made in Heiler, "The Madonna as Religious Symbol," 350.
87. Goethe, *Faust,* V, 12088–12093; Goethe, *Werke,* 3:363.

### 6. Crosses Ancient and Modern

1. Cf. G. Fornari, *Leonardo e la crisi del Rinascimento* (Milano-Udine: Mimesis, 2019), 172–73.
2. Celsus, *Alethès logos,* II, 34a–c.
3. Celsus, *Alethès logos,* II, 35–36 and 39.
4. Celsus, *Alethés logos,* I, 54.
5. Diodorus Siculus, III, 65 (Diodore de Sicile, *Bibliothèque historique. Livre III,* ed. by B. Bommelaer [Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1989], 102–4); W.K.C. Guthrie, *Orpheus and Greek Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 266.
6. *Orphicorum fragmenta,* fr. 150; V. Macchioro, *Zagreus,* ed. C. Pugliese (Milano: Mimesis, 2014), 455n267; Guthrie, *Orpheus and Greek Religion,* 23 and 265–66.
7. R. Eisler, *Orphisch-Dionysische Mysteriengedanken in der christlichen Antike* (1925; repr. Hildesheim: Olms, 1966), 338–39.
8. F. Carotta and A. Eickenberg, "Orpheos Bakkikos—The Missing Cross," on the site www.academia.edu, pp. 1–27 (the article is useful also for establishing the questioned authenticity of the tiny seal formerly preserved in the Berlin Bode Museum that disappeared during the Second World War).
9. Justin, *First Apology,* 55, 1; cf. Macchioro, *Zagreus,* 454.
10. On the apologetic motif of the imitation of the Christian rituals by demons, cf. C. Martínez Maza, "La cristianización de los démones mistéricos," in *Estudios sobre Plutarco: misticismo y religiones místericas en la obra de Plutarco,* ed. A. Pèrez Jiménez and F. Casadesús Bordoy (Madrid-Málaga: Ediciones Clásicas, 2001), 169–70.
11. On Justin's doctrine of *Logos,* see J. Daniélou, *Message* évangélique *et Culture hellénistique aux II et III siècles* (Tournai: Desclée, 1961), 317–28.
12. H.G. Liddell and R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon,* rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), *s.v.* ἀνασταυρίζω.
13. On this topic, see M. Hengel, *The Cross of the Son of God,* Engl. trans. J. Bowden (London: SCM, 1986), 91–185.
14. J.G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1951), 410–13.
15. Cf. E. Cantarella, *I supplizi capitali in Grecia e a Roma* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1991), 175–210.
16. See vol. 1, chapter 2, § 4.
17. Celsus, *Alethès logos,* II, 47b.
18. Euripides, *Bacchae* 1125–31; on l. 1127 the verb ἀπεσπάραξεν highlights the accomplishing of *sparagmós* (cf. Euripides, *Bacchae,* ed. R. Seaford [Warminster: Aris &

Phillips, 2001], *ad v.,* p. 238). The "loose syntax of natural speech" noticed in Euripides, *Bacchae,* ed. E.R. Dodds (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 218, at ll. 1131–33, could be a stylistic reproduction of the accomplished *sparagmos.*

19. Cf. M. Eliade, *Traité d'histoire des religions* (Paris: Payot, 1949), § 112, pp. 258–59.
20. Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar,* 3, 1, 60–70 (W. Shakespeare, *The Complete Works,* ed. S. Wells et al. [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994], 612).
21. Girard simply applies his mimetic approach, without realizing the mediatory meaning of Caesar's words: R. Girard, *A Theater of Envy: William Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 197.
22. Euripides, *Bacchae* 949–50; see vol. 1, chapter 6, § 2.
23. G. Fornari, *Da Dioniso a Cristo: Conoscenza e sacrificio nel mondo greco e nella civiltà occidentale* (Genova-Milano: Marietti, 2006), 312 ff.
24. That was the intentional and demonstrative choice of the judges: A.-L. Zévaès, *Damiens le regicide* (Paris: Editions de la Nouvelle Revue Critique, 1933), 106–8.
25. Voltaire, "Précis du siècle de Louis XV," in Voltaire, Œuvres *historiques,* ed. R. Pomeau (Paris: Pléiade, Gallimard, 1957), 1526–31.
26. See the evidence collected in D. Arasse, *La guillottine et l'imaginaire de la Terreur* (Paris: Flammarion, 1987), 65–93.
27. Fornari, *Leonardo e la crisi del Rinascimento,* 47–49, 336–44.
28. Zévaès, *Damiens le regicide,* 27–32, 75–77, and 179.
29. M. Foucault, *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), 10. After a first passage from *La Gazette d'Amsterdam,* April 1, 1757, the author mentions as source the *Rapport de l'exempt Bouton* in Zévaès, *Damiens le regicide,* 201–14, on which I checked the passages (here ibid., 211).
30. Zévaès, *Damiens le regicide,* 87–92 and 118–23.
31. A. Prosperi, "Morire volentieri: condannati a morte e sacramenti," in *Misericordie: Conversioni sotto il patibolo tra Medioevo ed età moderna,* ed. A. Prosperi (Pisa: Edizioni della Normale, 2007), 43–44.
32. Zévaès, *Damiens le regicide,* 98–100.
33. On the Minotaur in the *Cretans*, see vol. 1, chapter 3, § 1.
34. Foucault, *Surveiller et punir,* 10–11 (Zévaès, *Damiens le regicide,* 212).
35. See, for example, the letter by Poggio Bracciolini, "Poggius Leonardo Arretino," on the process and the final burning at the stake of Jan Hus's follower Jerome of Prague, in *Prosatori latini del Quattrocento,* ed. E. Garin (Milano-Napoli: Ricciardi, 1952), 229–41.
36. L. Villari, *Settecento adieu: Dall'illuminismo alla rivoluzione* (Milano: Bompiani, 1989), 109–12.
37. On this tradition in France, see E.H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (1957; repr. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 250–58 and 409–19.

38. G. Bataille, *Le coupable,* in Bataille, Œuvres *complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973–), 5, pt. 1:283.
39. G. Fornari, *A God Torn to Pieces: The Nietzsche Case,* Engl. trans. K. Buck in collaboration with the author (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013), 101–6.
40. Fornari, *A God Torn to Pieces,* 25 ff. See the juvenile writings collected in the *editio maior* of Nietzsche's works: F. Nietzsche, *Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe,* ed. G. Colli and M. Montinari et al. (Berlin-New York: De Gruyter, 1999), I, 1, 4[77], pp. 281–305; I, 2, 5[1], pp. 3–4; 6[77], pp. 122–123 (a poem centered on his father's grave: 'Meines Vaters Grab'); then we have an impressive series of drafts: 10[8], pp. 255–257; 10[9], pp. 258–259; 10[10], pp. 259–263; and finally: I, 3, 15[41], pp. 189–192; 15[42], pp. 193–196; 18[2], pp. 417–419; I, 5, 69[6], p. 40; 69[7], pp. 40–41; 69[11], pp. 45–50; 70[1], pp. 52–54; 71[1], pp. 55–57.
41. P. Gay, *Freud: A Life for Our Time* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 10–12.
42. Cantarella, *I supplizi capitali,* 41–46.
43. Cf. F. De Luise and G. Farinetti, "L'infelicità del giusto e la crisi del socratismo platonico," in Platone, *La repubblica,* ed. by M. Vegetti (Napoli: Bibliopolis, 1998), 2:189–220.
44. G. Deiana, *Il giorno dell'espiazione: Il "kippur" nella tradizione biblica* (Bologna: EDB, 1995), 19, 42, 158 (actually, the extensive sense of expiation also for the *caper emissarius* results from ibid., 53–54).
45. W. Burkert, *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 59–67. On the Hittie scapegoat, see V. Haas, *Betrachtungen zur Traditiongeschichte hethitischer Rituale am Beispiel des "Sündenbock"-Motivs, in Hittite Studies in Honor of Harry A. Hoffner Jr.*, a cura di J. Beckman et al., Eisenbrauns, Winona Lake (IN) 2003, pp. 131–4.
46. See the ingenious analysis, though attenuated by the usual academic reserve, in K. Schmidt, *Sie bauten die ersten Tempel: Das rätselhafte Heiligtum am Göbleki Tepe* (München: Beck, 2016), 119–20.
47. The best synthesis of her religious view is in the essays "L'Amour de Dieu et le malheur" and "Formes de l'amour implicite de Dieu" (in S. Weil, *Attente de Dieu* [Paris: La Colombe, 1950], 81–166).
48. J. De Maistre, "Les soirées de Saint-Petersbourg," in de Maistre, Œuvres*,* ed. P. Glaudes (Paris: Laffont, 2007), 730.
49. A. Manzoni, *Tutte le opere,* ed. A. Chiari and F. Ghisalberti, vol. 2, part 1, *I promessi sposi* (Milano: A. Mondadori, 1977), 764–65.
50. Manzoni, *Adelchi,* IV, 23–24; A. Manzoni, *Tutte le opere,* ed. M. Martelli (Firenze: Sansoni, 1973), 1:210.
51. Dating back, besides other personal factors, to the intellectual influence of Ludwig Feuerbach (Gay, *Freud,* 28–29).
52. See vol. 1, introduction, § 2; S. Freud, *Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse: Die Zukunft einer Illusion* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 2007), 96.

53. See further, chapter 7, § 3.
54. S. Freud, *Totem und Tabu: Einige* Übereinstimmungen *im Seelenleben der Wilden und der Neurotiker* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 2007), 209. I have already analyzed this passage in Fornari, *Da Dioniso a Cristo,* 346–50.
55. Freud, *Totem und Tabu,* p. 196.
56. Freud, *Totem und Tabu,* 209.
57. Cf. Fornari, *Da Dioniso a Cristo,* 261–62.

### 7. The Cross in the Modern World

1. See F. Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke: Kritischen Studienausgabe,* ed. G. Colli and M. Montinari (Berlin-New York: De Gruyter, 1980) (henceforth NSW), 3:480-81; cf. vol. 1, gnosiological introduction, § 1.
2. Cf. M. Surya, *Georges Bataille, la mort à l'œuvre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), 281–339.
3. See G. Bataille, *Sur Nietzsche,* in Œuvres *complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973–), 6:107.
4. F. Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke: Kritischen Studienausgabe,* ed. G. Colli and M. Montinari (Berlin-New York: De Gruyter, 1980) (henceforth NSW), 3:481. Cf. G. Fornari, *Storicità radicale: Filosofia e morte di Dio* (Massa: Transeuropa, 2013), 238–39.
5. F. Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Briefe: Kritische Studienausgabe,* ed. G. Colli and M. Montinari (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1986), 8:570–77: initially the signature *Dionysos* prevails, finally *Der Gekreuzigte.*
6. Cf. F. Volpi, *Il nichilismo* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1996), 45–52.
7. G. Fornari, *A God Torn to Pieces: The Nietzsche Case,* Engl. trans. K. Buck in collaboration with the author (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013), 42–43, 78, and 104–5.
8. NSW, 6:199.
9. NSW, 13:223.
10. NSW, 13:237.
11. NSW, 6:199.
12. NSW, 6:200.
13. This *fable convenue* was taken for granted also by Bataille in his uneven last years (G. Bataille, *La souveraineté,* in Œuvres *complètes,* 8:423).
14. NSW, 6:200 and 202.
15. NSW, 6:204, 206, 211, and 216.
16. *Die große Politik,* in NSW, 13:637 ff.
17. NSW, 13:644, 25[14].
18. NSW, 6:213.
19. Interestingly, Nietzsche seems to follow Strauss when he describes the first reactions of Jesus's disciples in order to explain the myth of the Resurrection: D.F. Strauss, *The Life*

*of Jesus Critically Examined,* ed. P.C. Hodgson (London: SCM, 1973), 742–43 (see below, the conclusion, § 5).

20. NSW, 6:214–15.
21. See the juvenile writings mentioned in the previous chapter, note 37.
22. Fornari, *A God Torn to Pieces,* xiii and 26–27.
23. On this, see the unclassifiable research of E. Voegelin, *Die Rassenidee in der Geistegeschichte von Ray bis Carus* (Berlin: Junger & Dünnhaupt, 1933).
24. Cf. G. Deleuze, *Nietzsche et la philosophie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1973), 166 ff.
25. NSW, 6:266.
26. Fornari, *Storicità radicale,* 667–68.
27. NSW, 6:216.
28. Fornari, *A God Torn to Pieces,* 81–100.
29. NSW, 6:232.
30. *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, ed. H. Diels and W. Kranz (Berlin: Weidmann, 1972–74), 22-B62; cf. vol. 1, chapter 4, § 3; chapter 5, § 2; chapter 6, § 2.
31. NSW, 6:211.
32. NSW, 6:224.
33. The passage occurs in chapter 53: NSW, 6:235.
34. Cf. the very important fragment that his sister foolishly destroyed though she gave an account of its content: Fornari, *A God Torn to Pieces,* 101–2 and 136n5.
35. The documentation is collected in A. Verrecchia, *La catastrofe di Nietzsche a Torino* (Torino: Einaudi, 1978), 54–55; Fornari, *A God Torn to Pieces,* 138n44.
36. NSW, 6:235.
37. Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Briefe,* 8:579.
38. See S. Barbera, "Un biglietto smarrito di Friedrich Nietzsche a Jean Bourdeau, gennaio 1889," *Belfagor* 54 (January 1999): 74–78; Fornari, *A God Torn to Pieces,* 111 and 137–38n37.
39. Cf. E. Nolte, *Der europäische Bürgerkrieg 1917–1945: Nationalsozialismus und Bolschewismus* (München: Herbig, 1997).
40. Bataille, *La souveraineté,* in Œuvres complètes*,* 8:331 ff.
41. Origen, *Homilies on Joshua,* 8, 3; J. Daniélou, *Origène* (Paris: Le Table Ronde, 1948), 266 (cf. M. Simonetti, *Studi sulla cristologia del II e III secolo* [Roma: Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum, 1993], 177).
42. H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1994), 222 ff.
43. Cf. A. Dempf, *Sacrum Imperium: Geschichts- und Staatsphilosophie des Mittelalters und der politischen Renaissance* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgemeinschaft, 1954), 405–30; E.H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (1957; repr. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 51n20, speaks

of the principle *Rex est imperator in regno suo,* and how France was its main advocate (ibid., 338 ff. and elsewhere).

44. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism,* 230–31.
45. This is the main thesis of his *Der europäische Bürgerkrieg 1917–1945.*
46. See E. Voegelin, *History of Political Ideas,* vol. 2, *The Middle Ages to Aquinas,* ed. P. von Sivers (Columbia: Missouri University Press, 1997), 41–51.
47. C. Schmitt, *Antworten in Nürnberg,* ed. H. Quaritsch (Berlin: Dunker & Humblot, 2000), 68–82; Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism,* 395 ff.
48. His defeated position is autobiographically explained at best in C. Schmitt, *Ex Captivitate Salus: Erfahrungen der Zeit 1945/47* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2010).
49. Cf. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism,* 410. The systematic mass extermination of the Jews and all the categories of people classified as inferior began in 1941.
50. S. Freud, *Die Zukunft einer Illusion,* in *Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse: Die Zukunft einer Illusion* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 2007), 155: "die Stimme des Intellekts ist leise, aber sie ruht nicht, ehe sie sich Gehör geschafft hat" (the voice of intelligence is faint, but it does not rest until it has made itself heard).
51. For an overall assessment from a historical-critical viewpoint, see J.P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus,* vol. 2, *Mentor, Message, and Miracles* (New York: Doubleday, 1994) (henceforth Meier 2), 874–80.
52. I attempted a more thorough examination of the Christian apocalyptic writings in G. Fornari, "Figures of the Antichrist: The Apocalypse and Its Restraints in Contemporary Political Thought," *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* 17 (2010): 53–62.
53. Meier 2:924–25.
54. *Nomen divinum* omitted out of respect.
55. Only this interpretive movement detects the inner meaning of the apocalyptic texts in the New Testament, realizing Bultmann's endeavor in a full objectual sense.
56. See, e.g., F. Fabris, *Gesù il "Nazareno"* (Assisi: Cittadella, 2011), 539.
57. Strauss, *The Life of Jesus,* 499.
58. See J. Gnilka, *Das Evangelium nach Markus* (Mannheim: Patmos Verlag, 2010), 197–98.
59. The parallel is admitted in Meier 2:931–32.
60. An effective description of the present state of things in J.-P. Dupuy, *Economy and the Future: A Crisis of Faith,* Engl. trans. M.B. DeBevoise (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2014), ix–xx.
61. Meier 2:905–6.
62. Cf. Gnilka, *Das Evangelium nach Markus,* 265–66.
63. Strauss, *The Life of Jesus,* 502.
64. Meier 2:921–22, does not exclude this possibility but does not accept it either, because of his unsatisfactory approach to the problem of the Resurrection.

65. Gnilka, *Das Evangelium nach Markus,* 270; Meier 2:914–19. See above vol. 2, chapter 5, § 5.
66. Meier 2:909.

### Conclusion: A Point of Arrival and Departure

1. Celsus, *Alethes logos,* V, 14.
2. On the word, see A. Oepke, *s.v.* ἀνίστημι, in *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament,* ed. G. Kittel (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1933–), 1:368–72.
3. This is, for example, the general setting of L. Moraldi, *L'Aldilà dell'Uomo* (Milano: A. Mondadori, 2000).
4. Cf. the too narrow selection of ancient sources made in the useful anthology in P. Seidensticker, *Zeitgenössische Texte zur Osterbotschaft der Evangelien* (Stuttgart: Verlag Kath. Bibelwerk, 1967) (on this author see below).
5. N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (London: SPCK, 2003), 65–68.
6. Of some interest was the attempt to define the problem in *Corps des dieux,* ed. C. Malamoud and J.-P. Vernant (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), but without extending the inquiry to Christ's resurrection.
7. See vol. 1, chapter 2, § 2.
8. This is the direct explanation of the paradoxical relations between human body and divine body described in J.-P. Vernant, "Corps obscur, corps éclatant," in Malamoud and Vernant, *Corps des dieux,* 19–58.
9. M.C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 151–233.
10. Cf. Euripides, *Alcestis,* ed. A.M. Dale (London: Bristol Classical Press, 2003) (henceforth Dale ed.), vii–xvii.
11. G. Fornari, *Da Dioniso a Cristo: Conoscenza e sacrificio nel mondo greco e nella civiltà occidentale* (Genova-Milano: Marietti, 2006), 136–38.
12. Euripide, *Le Cyclope, Alceste, Médée, Les Héraclides,* ed. L. Méridier (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1970) (henceforth Méridier ed.), 93–94n3.
13. Dale ed., xviii–xxii.
14. See e.g. the interpretation of C. Diano, "Senso dell'Alcesti," introduction to Euripide, *Alcesti,* ed. C. Diano (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 1968), xviii–xix.
15. Dale ed., vii–ix.
16. Dale ed., xxvii–xxviii.
17. S. Weil, *Intuitions pré-chrétiennes* (Paris: La Colombe, 1951).
18. Fornari, *Da Dioniso a Cristo,* 290–91.
19. R. Girard, *A Theater of Envy: William Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 342, interprets the scene in this sense, reading it as a ransom from mimetic desire and art itself, charged with unavoidable involvement in sacrifice.

20. Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale,* 4, 4, 127–32 (W. Shakespeare, *The Complete Works,* ed. S. Wells et al. [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994], 1119).
21. See S. Dewar-Watson, "The *Alcestis* and the Statue Scene in *The Winter's Tale,*" *Shakespeare Quarterly* 1 (2009): 73–80, indicating as probable source the Latin translation by George Buchanan published in 1539 (I thank William Johnsen for suggesting to me this article).
22. By undervaluing the religious hypotext of the play, Dewar-Watson does not understand the reason for Hermione's silence ("The *Alcestis* and the Statue Scene," 76): actually, Hermione's silence overturns in its meaning the silence of Euripides's character, not yet freed from the bounds of Hades.
23. Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale,* 4, 4, 116–18 (Shakespeare, *The Complete Works,* 1118–19).
24. *Hymn to Demeter* 16 (used edition, *Inni Omerici*, ed. F. Cássola, Fondazione L. Valla [Milano: A. Mondadori, 1986] [henceforth Cássola ed.]); cf. vol. 1, chapter 9, § 4.
25. Méridier ed., 45.
26. Dale ed., xi–xii.
27. From l. 387 to l. 400 the text is seriously damaged and has been the object of conjectural reconstructions. Cássola ed., *ad vv.* 387–404, p. 483).
28. Greek text, with the supplementation of the lacunae, as presented in Cássola ed., 68.
29. Cf. Cássola ed., *ad vv.* 385–86, pp. 482–83.
30. K. Kerényi, *Eleusis: Archetypal Image of Mother and Daughter,* Engl. trans. R. Manheim (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 142–43 and 180; cf. Kerényi, *Dionysos: Archetypal Image of Indestructible Life,* Engl. trans. R. Manheim (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 23–24.
31. J.G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1951), 456–62; Cássola ed., p. 25 and *ad vv.* 401–3, p. 483, adds that the traditional return of Persephone in springtime can be extraneous to the original version of the myth.
32. Dante, *Inferno,* III, 20 (D. Alighieri, *La commedia,* ed. A. Lanza [Anzio: De Rubeis, 1996], 23).
33. Dante, *Paradiso,* I, 113 (D. Alighieri, *La commedia,* ed. A. Lanza [Anzio: De Rubeis, 1996], 543, with an intervention).
34. See vol. 2, chapter 5, § 6.
35. Cf. A. Pippin Burnett, "The Virtues of Admetus," in *Greek Tragedy: Modern Essays in Criticism,* ed. E. Segal (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), 262.
36. C.D. Elledge, *Resurrection of the Dead in Early Judaism (200 BCE–CE 200)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 19–43.
37. On the distinction between the two theological models, to be understood as complementary, see P. Sacchi, *Storia del Secondo Tempio: Israele tra VI secolo a.C. e I secolo d.C.* (Torino: SEI, 2002), 9–12 and 465–67.

38. G. Garbini, *Myth and History in the Bible*, Engl. trans. C. Peri (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 139; cf. vol. 1, chapter 10, § 6.
39. See vol. 1, chapter 9, § 3.
40. Cf. S.J. Bedard, "A Nation of Heroes: From Apotheosis to Resurrection," in *Resurrection of the Dead: Biblical Traditions in Dialogue,* ed. G. Van Oyen and T. Shepherd (Leuven: Uitgeverij Peters, 2012), 453–60.
41. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God,* 119–25; cf. R.B. Onians, *The Origins of European Thought about the Body, the Mind, the Soul, the World, Time, and Fate: New Interpretations of Greek, Roman and Kindred Evidence also of Some Basic Jewish and Christian Beliefs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 80, 185–86, 255, and 259–69.
42. J.P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus,* vol. 1, *The Roots of the Problem and the Person* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 13 and 197–98.
43. R. Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity in Its Contemporary Setting,* Engl. trans. R.H. Fuller (Cleveland-New York: The World Publishing Co., 1965), 196.
44. P. Seidensticker, *Die Auferstehung Jesu in der Botschaft der Evangelisten: Ein traditiongeschichtlicher Versuch zum Problem der Sicherung der Osterbotschaft in der apostolischen Zeit* (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1967).
45. I am making reference to the anthology Seidensticker, *Zeitgenössische Texte zur Osterbotschaft der Evangelien.*
46. Seidensticker, *Die Auferstehung Jesu,* 75.
47. R.E. Brown, *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (New York: Paulist Press, 1973), 108–11, is based on sound reasonings but emphasizes their hypothetical character, even though it is difficult to find conclusions as well-grounded as these in the historical analysis of the New Testament writings.
48. Letter to F. Vischer, February 8, 1838, in P.C. Hodgson, "Strauss's Theological Development from 1825 to 1849," introduction to D.F. Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined,* ed. P.C. Hodgson (London: SCM, 1973), xx.
49. Strauss, *The Life of Jesus,* 742–44.
50. This point is thoroughly argued by H. Kessler, *Sucht den Lebenden nicht bei den Toten: Die Auferstehung Jesu Christi in biblischer, fundamentaltheologischer und systematischer Sicht* (Würzburg: Echter, 1995).
51. 1 Cor 15:6 could be the oldest among the resurrectional apparitions listed by Paul (see below, note 58).
52. All the sources are set it in Jerusalem (cf. J. Jeremias, *Neutestamentliche Theologie,* vol. 1, *Die Verkündigung Jesu* [Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1971], 289–90).
53. Cf. the analysis in J.A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke,* The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 1554–60.
54. As rightly stressed by Jeremias, *Neutestamentliche Theologie,* 290, that so describes the *Christophanie* subsequent to the first *Angelophanie:* "*Noch einmal ist es Maria von Magdala* allein."

55. Seidensticker, *Die Auferstehung Jesu,* 61.
56. J. Gnilka, *Das Evangelium nach Markus* (Mannheim: Patmos Verlag, 2010), 352–54.
57. A good analysis of the Jewish and original components of the Pauline idea of resurrection is in Elledge, *Resurrection of the Dead in Early Judaism,* 207–13.
58. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God,* 207–398.
59. Strauss, *The Life of Jesus,* 740–42.
60. It should be noticed that Paul was probably trying to overcome the objection that the several bodily parts are useless in a transcendent dimension, a problem inherited by the Christian apologists: cf. G. O'Collins, *Jesus Risen: An Historical, Fundamental, and Systematic Examination of Christ's Resurrection* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987).
61. Cf. Gnilka, *Das Evangelium nach Markus,* 350–51.
62. Cf. G. Van Oyen, "The Empty Tomb Story in the Gospel of Mark and Michel Foucault's Concept of 'Heterotopia,'" in Van Oyen and Shepherd, *Resurrection of the Dead,* 137–58, though Foucault's idea appears of little use for the sake of discussing Mark.
63. The attempt of Jeremias to explain the phrase on the three days in the gospel Passion predictions as coming from a separate tradition is groundless, and his explanation of this expression as a usage of Semitic languages unknown to Mark and Luke is unconvincing (Jeremias, *Neutestamentliche Theologie,* 271–72). Needless to say, the comparative problem is completely ignored.
64. This Creed from Antioch dates back to an early phase of diffusion of the *kerygma,* though with further redactional interventions and some Pauline insertions (J.P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus,* vol. 3, *Companions and Competitors* [New York: Doubleday, 2001], 139: "we have here one of the earliest creedal statements of the church"; cf. J. Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus,* Engl. trans. N. Perrin [London-Philadelphia: SCM-Trinity Press, 1990], 101–3); it must be added that 1 Cor 15:6 was probably part of the original formulation: see Seidensticker, *Die Auferstehung Jesu,* 24–30 and 40.
65. In all likelihood, the theological setting of the Antioch *kerygma* was judged too archaic by the evangelists (cf., for Luke, Seidensticker, *Die Auferstehung Jesu,* 105–6): they were looking for a wider perspective, besides the problem of coordinating the Galilean material with the Resurrection in Jerusalem.
66. Cf. J. Dupont, Études sur les *Actes des Apôtres* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1967), 321–36, where the third day is linked to some biblical passages and particularly to the Christian *interpretatio* of Hos 6:2, but this raises the further question of how that symbolism was born.
67. Brown, *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection,* 113 ff.
68. Brown, *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection,* 115–16.
69. Strauss, *The Life of Jesus,* 705–09.
70. C.S. Mann, *Mark,* The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1986), 666.

71. Cf. O. Mainville, "Le rôle des récits résurrectionelles en Matthieu 28: Une relecture rédactionelle," in Van Oyen and Shepherd, *Resurrection of the Dead,* 119–35.
72. Seidensticker, *Die Auferstehung Jesu,* 78.
73. Cf. Brown, *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection,* 121n203.
74. R.E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John,* The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 1045–46.
75. Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale,* 5, 3, 94–95 (Shakespeare, *The Complete Works,* 1130).
76. D. Alighieri, *Vita nuova,* XXVI (Alighieri, *Tutte le opere,* ed. by L. Blasucci [Firenze: Sansoni, 1981], 69).
77. Tertullian, *De praescriptione haereticorum,* VII, 9: "Quid ergo Athenis et Hierosolymis?" (What in common between Athens and Jerusalem?).

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